

The head, heart and soul of planning

Article

Published Version

Parker, G. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3079-4377> and
Maidment, C. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9158-6910>
(2025) The head, heart and soul of planning. *Town and
Country Planning*, 94 (2). pp. 122-127. ISSN 0040-9960
Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/122178/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/journals/>

Publisher: Town and Country Planning Association

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The head, heart and soul of planning

Gavin Parker and Chris Maidment explain why education, knowledge and ethical principles are critical for the planning profession, particularly in a time of rapid change

The evolution of planning is but part of the context of what has been termed the 'multi-change' environment,¹ which involves the management of changing places, changing issues, changing policy and shifting responsibility or scope. As recent government rhetoric sails close to promising to add to this composite of change forces, we reflect on the dynamic situation in which professional planners operate.

Planning is intrinsically about managing change while contending with shifting issues and priorities. Publication of a new National Planning Policy Framework, and a raft of consultations and proposals since autumn 2024, illustrates how change has become ever-present. Some change is positive, but we need to ask *what* is the change, *how* do we deal with it, and *when* should it be embraced and secured, or re-assessed and challenged?

We focus here on the importance of knowledge, skills and education in equipping planners to prepare for and cope with change. What role should ongoing education play across the arc of a career in a multi-change environment? Relevant and enduring education should be a constant concern, or we risk diminishing professional knowledge and skills, ethical practice and the fundamental purpose of planning – its head, heart and soul.

The different types of change playing out at the moment can be distilled down to changes of *environment, policy, scope, and roles*. This set of change factors already present a challenge for the professional, to which we add *frequency* of change, and ask how do these impact on capacity, roles, skills and knowledge in application? We need to make an overt effort to sustain common ground and ensure shared understanding of purpose and normative boundaries as hallmarks of a profession. The planning profession is now spread across sectors² and switching jobs and sectors is commonplace. Questions of knowledge and skills, of ethical practice and clear purpose all underpin professionalism and are shared responsibilities for universities, employers, professional bodies, and individuals.



Attending conferences and lectures can be a valuable part of continuing professional development

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Set against a discussion of what is covered as part of a planner's education, is the question of who is providing planning education and training, and when. There have been long-run tensions based on the range of existing education and the breadth of different skills and roles in planning.

Writing in *The Planner* in 2024, one practitioner noted that 'novice town planners will have to hit the ground running to make a *meaningful* impact – which poses a challenge ... the majority of UK university planning courses focus on theory rather than the actual *practice* of town planning.'³

This begs several questions, including what is practice? On what basis do we judge priority or precedence, and what is judged 'meaningful' in a multi-change context? Whether intended or not, the quote implies that a strong theoretical focus acts as an impediment to a strong grounding in diverse practice, or is otherwise a luxury not to be afforded. Yet this underplays the idea that theoretical understanding acts as a *basis* for effective practice, particularly over the breadth of a career. That the underlying shortage of planners in the UK might lead to frustrations about graduates not 'hitting the ground running' is understandable, but a more expansive view of what can and should be done to address this is required.

Furthermore, assumptions about the timing and duration of 'education' emphasise the importance of lifelong learning and relate to a longstanding debate about the purpose and coverage of planning education. Ongoing work by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), re-examining its educational policy for initial planning education' (IPE) – including its format and the skills, knowledges and attitudes that should be covered – renews the debate. However, it also highlights the need to review the whole situation.⁴ We resist the idea that a shortage of numbers should undermine the long-term quality of planners' education.⁵

We need to better comprehend the role and structure of education and lifelong learning in planning. Our work has explored the experience and application of IPE in practice by

recently graduated planners, including the relative role of continuing professional development (CPD).⁶ Our research makes a case for understanding what is 'practice-ready' rather differently, focusing less on whether a newly graduated planner can process a planning application, and more on the understanding of IPE as a grounding and professional base that covers theory, concepts, issues and tensions. Thereafter this is complemented by the longer-term importance of CPD, seen both as a means of knowledge top-up and as a refresher, and also to learn about new topics and issues.

A variety of models have attempted to indicate types of knowledge required for planners.⁷ Our research showed that the initial education of our participants equipped them with the soft skills necessary for effective practice and an ability to see what is stronger or weaker in terms of evidence and argument. The latter is fundamental to making effective and sound professional judgements.

'A planner easily replaced by artificial intelligence ... is an undesirable, dystopian future'



Improving professional development

This brings us to lifelong learning and CPD. The RTPI expects its members to undertake fifty hours of CPD per year and provides guidance on the types and sources of CPD that could be accessed.⁸ There are many organisations whose content is accessed for CPD purposes, sometimes offered by client organisations. There was a perception among research participants we spoke to that the current CPD offer could be too generalised and some parts were 'idealised' and removed from day-to-day practice. While we are optimistic about individuals exercising their professional judgement, this highlights a potential lack of quality-control of CPD, including the potential for organisations to use it to push particular messages about the planning system. There is a clear need to offer CPD that accommodates an increasingly diverse and fragmented profession and a diversity of skills and knowledge.

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A more coherent approach can also play an important role in reinvigorating what brings us together as a unified profession.

Overall, we argue that a planner who is trained in what processes make up planning and how to follow them, rather than educated about why that process exists and how it is intended to contribute to the broader goals of planning, is a planner easily replaced by artificial intelligence; this is an undesirable, dystopian future. This leads to questions of what the appropriate balance between IPE and other forms of training and ongoing learning should be, with the goal of preparing planners to pursue the fundamental purposes of planning in the multi-change environment. This should sound familiar to practitioners, given that different elements of planning education come to the fore at different points in a career, a point recognised by participants in our research.

It is clear that university planning schools in the UK need to perform several roles, acting not only as teaching institutions, sources of reflection and facilitators of networks, but also as sources of evidence, knowledge production and, potentially, as part of the CPD offer too. We must be smart about this, as significant changes have also taken place in the higher education sector and time and resources are scarce. Many universities are reporting operating deficits and multiple rounds of cost-savings. Planning schools do not have surplus resource or space to provide additional training and content for expanding the scope of planning education, particularly in accredited one-year postgraduate study programmes.

‘Double-loop’ learning

In the light of this, it is important to strengthen recursive linkages between different stages and actors – that is, across career pathways and the employers, professional institutes, and planning schools. This leads us to think about how we might better reflect this ‘double-loop’ learning in the lifelong learning phase to ensure relevance and critical reflection. CPD will have to be more clearly organised to show what is to be drawn from it across networking benefits, technical training, or more critical reflection. In terms of how to operationalise

this and sweat the assets we have, there are other ideas: high-quality podcasts? A return to a planning school for a week every year? The latter to remind ourselves why we became planners, what it all means and to reflect on how daily practice measures up – perhaps attached to the annual UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference. This gives some signal about what we might want to see from a more structured approach to CPD and lifelong learning in our new change environment. We have labelled this here, as elsewhere, 'double-loop CPD', which involves positive criticality and ongoing effort to deliver better places and better professionals.

Gavin Parker and **Chris Maidment** are both based at the University of Reading. All views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 G Parker, E Street and M Wargent: The Rise of the Private Sector in Fragmentary Planning in England'. *Planning Theory & Practice*, 2018, Vol.19(5) 734-750. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2018.1532529>
- 2 *State of the Profession 2023*. Research paper. Royal Town Planning Institute, Nov. 2023. <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/16015/state-of-the-profession-2023-final.pdf>
- 3 D Ustic: 'Ambitious targets? Get the politics and the process under control'. *The Planner*, July/August 2024, p.22. <https://www.theplanner.co.uk/2024/07/29/ambitious-targets-get-politics-and-process-under-control>
- 4 *Education for Everyone*. Review. Royal Town Planning Institute. 27 Jan. 2025. <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/new/our-strategic-priorities/education-for-everyone/>
- 5 For a dystopic exploration of the possible consequences see: N Odeleye and C Maidment: 'University, Comuniiversity, UniverCity: Shaping Future Graduates as Thinkers, Operators or CivicHackers?'. *Planning Theory & Practice*. 2020, Vol. 21(3), p.465. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14649357.2020.1776014?needAccess=true>
- 6 G Parker and C Maidment: 'Planning education and the field of practice: a Bourdieuan analysis'. *Town Planning Review*, 23 Dec. 2024. <https://www.theplanner.co.uk/2024/12/23/double-loop-cpd-theory-meets-practice-and-back-again>
- 7 G Parker and E Street: *Contemporary Planning: Skills, Specialisms and Knowledge (Planning, Environment, Cities)*. Bloomsbury, 2021, ch. 2.
- 8 *Continuing Professional Development*. Practice advice. Royal Town Planning Institute. 2017. <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/practice-rtpi/2017/december/continuing-professional-development/>