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Author(s): Jon Talbot

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a coming crisis in planning education?

Jon Talbot looks at the future provision of university-level planning education in the UK, and in particular at the robustness of a debt-based funding model

Many, many years ago – 2008 to be precise – Parliament was so worried about labour shortages and skills gaps in the planning profession that the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee prepared a report to address the issue. You can tell how long ago it was because the opening sentence reads ‘England’s planning system oils the engine of economic growth’.¹ Nowadays, we know better and realise that planners like nothing better than to hide economic opportunities in filing cabinets...

In those far off days, the university departments that provide education for the profession must have envisaged a golden future. Not only was demand for their core business – undergraduate education – buoyant, but there was also increasing demand for postgraduate courses and plenty of juicy research contracts to be won. There were even scholarships to solve the skills shortage in the profession, while demand from international students remained buoyant. Many existing providers took the opportunity to extend and diversify their portfolio of courses to deliver programmes in sustainability and regeneration and specialist niche programmes in conservation and design. As demand increased, more universities began offering courses, underpinned by a burgeoning research profile.

The current climate could not be more different, as university planning departments face a highly uncertain, far more competitive future. As planners and therefore as persons employed to, at some level, have a view of the future, we might expect them to be better prepared for the storms ahead than some in other academic disciplines. But as we all know, planners are often no better at anticipating the future than anyone else, and academic planners, relentlessly focused on their subject discipline, may

be poorly prepared to anticipate what is widely expected to be major changes in the practice of higher education. This difficulty in understanding their own business is compounded by the fact that there is great diversity in the sector.

While some institutions may need to make relatively slight adjustments to the way they operate, others will be facing either radical change or extinction. Radical change is not something universities are noted for, and adaptation may be hampered by conservatism.

Whether a crisis is coming is not something that can be predicted with any certainty, but there are reasons for believing that major changes are afoot. Some of these are more apparent than others, and to understand the nature of the various threats and opportunities I use here Donald Rumsfeld’s famous ‘known-knowns’, ‘known-unknowns’ and ‘unknown-unknowns’ typology. The known-knowns are, on the whole, of immediate consequence and specific to planning departments, while the known-unknowns and unknown-unknowns are really things which are likely to affect the whole of higher education over the next decade.

Having made that distinction, we should not assume that planning academics face challenges equal to those in other disciplines. As I shall argue, planning is a fairly marginal discipline in universities, and its continuing existence is therefore less secure than others.

UK universities and planning schools

There are currently 25 universities in the UK with RTP1 accredited programmes.² In addition, the University of Plymouth is awaiting accreditation, and there is a consortium providing distance-learning qualifications. There are also accredited

programmes outside the UK, but these do not concern us here.

Between them these universities are offering a total of 25 full-time Bachelor degrees, seven part-time Bachelor degrees, 65 full-time Masters degrees, and 55 part-time Masters degrees. In addition, there are a few awards at sub-degree level, such as Postgraduate Diplomas and distance-learning options. In total, 9,175 students were registered on UK planning courses in 2011/12 – less than 0.4% of the total number of students registered on programmes at UK universities. This compares with 23,135 studying architecture and 22,945 studying building.³

The average number of planning students at each institution but is about 60 per programme, so planning departments are small players on campus: they do not bring large numbers of students and hence income, so the power they wield within their university is limited. Against this, planning is one of a minority of subjects which still attracts central funding, in addition to income from students, to help pay for studios and field work. The level of support is not great (about a third of that of medical students, for example), but it is a significant factor. It is hard to know how many programmes are financially viable, and indeed it is likely that many universities do not know this about their own programmes.

'The great known-known for the future of planning education in the UK – and therefore the first part of the coming crisis – is that there are almost certainly too many programmes. If this is not the case already, it is likely to be the case in the very near future'

For approximately 120 years, universities have been built upon the model pioneered in Germany by the Humboldt Institute;⁴ i.e. they teach a broad range of scientific, humanities and vocational Bachelor and postgraduate programmes, facilitate research degrees, and conduct research. They have been slow to adopt modern management and financial accounting methods, and consequently there is often little financial transparency within institutions. Traditionally, universities have measured their financial health globally rather than paying much attention to the relative contribution of each faculty.

To maintain the Humboldtian model, large faculties, notably for medicine/health and business, have been regarded as cash cows to cross-subsidise other less profitable faculties and schools within them. This is fine until the overall financial health of an institution fails; and it is often at this point that universities begin to look more closely at those parts of the operation which do not pay their way. Typically, this leads to the closure of smaller departments.

Irrespective of financial crises, universities are becoming increasingly sophisticated in controlling costs and identifying viability. The adoption of modular systems has enabled cost savings by, for example, having full-time and part-time students together in the same classroom, alongside students on other programmes. Some degrees create differentiation by offering a shared core curriculum with optional modules to provide a suite of related but differently titled exit awards. Nonetheless, universities have significant overhead costs (in 2011/12 staff and other costs combined consumed 89% of universities' total income⁵), and it is increasingly common to hear of universities where modules are prevented from running unless there a minimum number of students – 35 in one case I recently heard of. Planning schools, with their low numbers, low income and low visibility, are always vulnerable on campus.

Known-knowns

Known-knowns constitute those aspects of threat which we already know; and in this case we know how many planning courses are running and we have time series data on the number of students. Together, these data provides a picture of what is happening now. This is not a perfect guide to future trends as historically there have been fluctuations. But what they reveal of trends in recent years gives cause for concern.

The great known-known for the future of planning education in the UK – and therefore the first part of the coming crisis – is that there are almost certainly too many programmes. If this is not the case already, then the Table 1 illustrates why it is likely to be the case in the very near future. The peak for numbers of students on planning courses was 2006/07, when there were 12,080 in total. Since then there has been a steady decline, so in 2011/12, the latest year for which there are figures, the number had dropped to 9,175 – a drop of almost a quarter (24%) in five years.

There are a number of points to note from Table 1. The core business (if we can call it that) – full-time undergraduates – has been relatively stable, recording an 11% drop. But there have been major changes in the numbers of postgraduates. The most marked decline is for part-time postgraduates – a 50% drop – while the number of full-time

Table 1
Total number of students enrolled on planning programmes in UK higher education institutes, 2006/07-2011/12

	Full time			Part time			Total
	Postgraduate	Undergraduate	Total	Postgraduate	Undergraduate	Total	
2006/07	1,855	4,485	6,340	3,785	1,905	5,740	12,080
2007/08	1,905	4,800	6,705	3,685	1,665	5,350	12,055
2008/09	1,975	4,940	6,915	3,400	1,725	5,125	12,040
2009/10	2,120	4,895	7,015	2,935	1,760	4,690	11,705
2010/11	2,385	4,470	6,855	2,475	1,640	4,120	10,975
2011/12	2,080	3,975	6,050	1,875	1,250	3,125	9,175

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency³

Table 2
Number of first-year students on UK university planning programmes, 2009/10-2011/12

	Full time			Part time		
	Postgraduate	Undergraduate	Total	Postgraduate	Undergraduate	Total
2009/10	1,605	1,550	3,155	1,000	765	1,760
2010/11	1,780	1,355	3,130	785	670	1,465
2011/12	1,605	1,295	2,905	580	490	1,065

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency³

postgraduates has increased by 12%, the only category to do so. Although a breakdown figure is not available, it is not hard to speculate that the increase has been driven by international students, while the decrease in part-time postgraduate numbers has been as a result of a fall in demand from UK students.

There are two further points to note. First, the total number of about 9,000 planning students in total is not unprecedented. There were similar numbers in the late 1990s, although at that time there were fewer accredited schools and programmes.

While that might reassure some, there are good reasons to believe that the decline in part-time postgraduates will accelerate. The introduction of full-cost undergraduate fees in 2012/13 has already deterred many of those older learners seeking vocational qualifications who make up the bulk of part-time students.⁶ But we have not seen the impact of changes within another traditional source of part-time students – those who have completed a Bachelor degree and seek a vocational postgraduate qualification before entering the labour market. Given the average level of debt graduates are expected to carry, a widespread downturn in demand for postgraduate programmes of all descriptions is widely expected. The picture

becomes even more alarming when we examine the number of students on their first year of study (see Table 2) – a figure available only since 2009/10. This gives a more up-to-date picture of the trend in admissions.

Table 2 shows that in the past two years the number of students on full-time undergraduate programmes has declined by 16%, while the numbers for full-time postgraduates, where we might have expected growth, was essentially flat, reflecting the more general plateauing of international students coming to the UK. Second, the decline in part-time numbers is even more marked in recent years than over a longer time scale. Given the concerns about the impact of higher fees for undergraduate programmes on demand for all postgraduate programmes, there must be doubts about the viability of some programmes which are part time only.

To understand the relative performance of planning, let us compare it with global performance (i.e. all subjects). Table 3 compares the number of students on all full- and part-time programmes in UK universities with the relevant figures for planning students. As can be seen, the 'all programmes' figure for the number of full-time students has remained broadly the same during the past three years – compared with a 7% fall in the number of

planning students. While the number of part-time students has declined markedly for all programmes, the rate of decrease is far greater for planning students, and appears to be accelerating. This is even more pronounced for part-time postgraduate numbers – an area already highlighted for concern.

The known-known element of the crisis for university planning schools is therefore principally related to declining admissions, relative to other programmes.

The second part of the financial equation, the drop in research income, is harder to estimate as there are no published figures to provide guidance. The major government source of research income, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), has had its global budget cut from £174.6 million in 2011/12 to £166.9 million by 2014/15 and its priorities altered to reflect an agenda more given over to economic growth.⁶

This is not to say that there are no opportunities for planning academics to win contracts or that there are no alternative sources of income. But for planning academics, unsurprisingly, many of these alternative research contracts have been from public bodies. The squeeze on public spending makes the availability of alternative research contracts less likely as a source of income than during the boom years. Moreover, the competition has intensified for those resources as academics in other disciplines are also squeezed. While it is not suggested that funded research will cease, income from research is likely to decline for the foreseeable future, further threatening the viability of many planning departments.

It is difficult to see much good news for university planning departments for the foreseeable future. The potential pool of undergraduates is declining, as the number of 18-year-olds in the population is forecast to drop until after 2020.⁷ Within this shrinking pool of potential students for all programmes, planning is a decreasingly popular choice. The other potential sources of students, part time and

postgraduate, are in steep decline and forecast to decline further. There is very limited scope for diversification into specialist areas such as regeneration as demand is declining sharply there, too. Traditional sources of research income are declining and it would appear that alternative sources are also decreasing. The one bright spot – international students – appears to have peaked.

Planning schools, where they exist as separate entities, are small and vulnerable to drives for economic efficiency on campus. This is not to suggest that all will be affected equally. It seems likely that well established departments, located in major cities with long-standing research profiles and able to attract large numbers of international students, are best equipped to survive – and may even prosper by soaking up demand from closed departments elsewhere.

Known-unknowns

While the known-knowns are relatively identifiable and the effects relatively predictable, the known-unknowns are things of which we are aware but whose impact is less certain. Here, the focus switches away from planning schools to the widely predicted major changes about to affect the whole of higher education. As we have already noted, planning schools are a very small part of UK university provision and are affected by a range of factors beyond their control. University planning schools have until recently prospered as part of a general process of lavish public support for universities. Planning schools grew, albeit marginally, while the whole of the sector grew exponentially. When the prospects for the sector as a whole were good, universities were more willing to cross-subsidise smaller, niche departments or to risk extending their portfolio of provision by creating new programmes.

During the last 20 years governments around the world competed in a sort of higher education arms race to ensure that as many of the population as

Table 3
Numbers of first-year full- and part-time students on all programmes compared with planning programmes

	All programmes		All part-time postgraduate	Planning programmes		Planning part-time postgraduate
	Full time	Part time		Full time	Part time	
2009/10	717,395	467,795	132,745	3,155	1,760	1,000
2010/11	716,555 (-0.1%)	429,555 (-8.2%)	127,925 (-3.6%)	3,130 (-0.8%)	1,465 (-16.8%)	785 (-21.5%)
2011/12	729,225 (+1.8%)	388,115 (-9.6%)	109,535 (-14.4%)	2,905 (-7.2%)	1,065 (-27.3%)	580 (-26.1%)

possible attended university. In part, this reflected a long-term trend towards ever greater rates of participation and an established narrative of ever greater social progress, encapsulated by Martin Trow's famous characterisation of higher education as evolving from elite participation, through mass and finally on to universal participation.⁸ He considered the tipping point of the transition from mass to universal participation to have been reached when more than 50% of the population exited the education system at university level.

The previous Labour Government adopted this 50% target in an attempt to catch up with nations such as Poland and Finland, where more than 60% graduate.⁹ The 50% target was never reached, and levels have remained at about 43% for the past few years. However, this is a considerable improvement on the 7% or so level during the early 1970s when I entered the system.

At one level, therefore, higher education policy is like housing policy in the 1960s – a numbers game. Governments of both parties have been willing to create more universities and subsidise ever more graduates. The deeper reason for increased public investment has been the perceived long-term economic benefit. Since the beginning of the 1960s and the work of Becker on human capital, it has been widely (if not universally) accepted that education, and in particular higher education, is the driving force behind economic growth.¹⁰

More recently, the theory was given greater currency by a belief among Western governments that the key to maintaining economic competitiveness in the face of low-cost competition from the Far East and elsewhere is to move Western economies towards the generation of intellectual property. In particular, influential figures like Robert Reich claimed that economic prosperity in Western nations rests the upon the ability of people to engage in analytic thinking and manipulate symbols – whether figures, numbers, words or images. In order to do so, these 'symbolic analysts', as he called them, require heavy investment in high-end education.¹¹

During this period, from approximately the mid-1980s to 2007, we were in what economists called the 'great moderation' – a belief that we had solved our fundamental economic problems in respect of growth and inflation. The dominant model of economic growth – endogenous growth theory – emphasised the value of human capital within a specific locality, enabling knowledge spill-overs.¹² From the universities' perspective, this was all wonderful news. Not only were they seen as the undisputed instruments that would boost economic growth, they were also its beneficiaries. While the financial sector and others paid their taxes, there was public investment to spend on supporting students, research and institutions.

From the perspective of New Labour in particular, universities pressed every button. Universities were thought to be good for us economically and a potential mechanism for social engineering – the 'widening participation' agenda. Universities in the UK and other developed nations not only recruited more students, they developed more programmes and crucially invested considerable sums in the campus. Universities today are awash with newly built classrooms, extended libraries, research centres and sports facilities as a result of that public largesse. The power of this narrative is such that even in these austere times funding has been maintained. Between 2005/6 and 2011/12, university income has grown by 44%.¹³

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While the level of funding has increased, the mechanisms to facilitate it have changed. The previous Labour Government introduced tuition fees, whereby the student paid essentially a third of the cost of tuition. To meet the rising bill for extra student places, Sir John Browne was commissioned to investigate the basis for funding.¹⁴ Browne duly recommended transferring the cost of tuition for most subjects entirely onto students, a policy subsequently implemented by the Coalition and introduced for the first time for the 2012/13 intake.

While it is still too early to say what the effect of the introduction of undergraduate fees will be on overall demand, some have undoubtedly been deterred from study.⁶ Mature learners, as opposed to school leavers, are highly debt averse, and the average total expected cost of £83,000 over a lifetime (including interest charges) seems sufficient to have deterred many of them from entering higher education – especially when the anticipated lifetime return on a degree is now calculated at only £100,000.¹⁵

Despite this, young people seem prepared to take on the debt necessary to fund a university education. But it is difficult to envisage this situation continuing indefinitely given the level of cuts in public spending envisioned by the Chancellor in the 2013 Autumn Statement.

The broader context is the budget for the sponsoring ministry, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The largest part of its budget (39%) is spent on higher education, and during the period 2010/11-2015/16 the overall departmental budget will be subject to a cut of almost a third (30.7%).¹⁶ Yet the Autumn Statement included a commitment to fund an additional 30,000 student places in 2014/15 and an end to the cap on student numbers altogether the following year, at an annual estimated additional cost of £2 billion to the Treasury. The sale of the Student Loans Company is expected to provide some of the money, but there are widespread concerns that the planned increases are not fully funded.¹⁷

The latest increases were not greeted within the sector with the unalloyed joy that might have been expected. There are serious doubts as to whether the funding regime created in 2011 is sustainable. One of the most pressing fears is the effect of student debt on demand for postgraduate courses from 2015. How many graduates who already have large debts are going to be able to pay for a Master's degree? The latest proposed increase in numbers compounds the problems.

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The Student Loans Company is being sold as if it were a capital asset, when in fact it is a chunk of debt. It is being sold so that more debt (student loans) can be incurred. Interest rates for student loans are well below commercial lending rates, so any prospective purchaser will either want to raise interest rates and/or will seek a guarantee of returns by the state if repayments are less than expected. The forecast repayment rates are widely regarded as over-optimistic, so the fear is that at some point central government will be forced to meet the cost of historic debt at the expense of current expenditure.¹³

We all know the consequences of having to bail out the banks. Having to bail out the Student Loans Company may be relatively small beer by comparison, but it is hard to imagine that there will be no consequences for the current system of funding of universities – and, with that, small departments will be the most vulnerable. Even if

there are no major cuts, there is a real anxiety about funding for postgraduate education.

There is a strange atmosphere in universities at present. Unlike most other public institutions, they have been cossetted and protected. But there is an undercurrent of uncertainty such that the issue of funding dominates the policy debate. Over-reliance on debt has had disastrous consequences for all of us, but we have created a funding system for higher education where debt is central. The worry is that we are graduating beyond our means.

Unknown-unknowns

While many have been preoccupied with cost and funding issues, the very basis for continuing public support has been increasingly questioned. There have always been those who have argued that the real value of a university education has little to do with what students actually learn, and in recent years the empirical evidence appears to lend this support.¹⁸ Large-scale research in the US has demonstrated that universities do not actually add much value to the majority of students they teach. Indeed, it seems many students actually get worse at the high-level cognitive skills universities claim to develop.¹⁹

And Brown and his colleagues²⁰ have published research to show that, contrary to the claims of Reich and others like him, the evidence is that there are too few high-level jobs as 'symbolic analysts' for the number of graduates being produced. Instead, many will perform relatively menial roles in the service sector and be poorly equipped to compete for better-paid technical roles. Nor is it true that Western nations alone have a monopoly in higher-level skills with which to maintain their economic advantage over other nations.

The same authors demonstrate that emerging economies such as China and India are investing even more in higher education and will achieve levels of educational attainment similar to those of Western nations. There is simply no evidence that UK graduates, along with those from other Western nations, will continue to justify premium salaries in a globalised economy on the basis of a superior education. A software engineer in India is just as well qualified as one in the UK, but a lot cheaper.

What is not clear is whether there is likely to be a shift in demand. At the moment, 18-year-olds seem happy to stick with the current model of full-time undergraduate provision, often at distance from home, at a publicly funded university. The move from home is largely a UK peculiarity, reflecting the origins of the system, when it was small in scale and replicated the boarding school experience.²¹ Cost of living expenses, combined with full-cost fees and often poor job prospects and a low or neutral return (in terms of salary) on the initial investment, together make a Bachelor degree in the



Clifford Harper

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UK, at least as traditionally delivered, an increasingly unattractive proposition.

The evidence for this is indirect, but competition for places on the best apprenticeships is now as great as it is for the most competitive programmes at Russell Group universities.²² A subject like planning has one advantage over other subject areas, as it has a clear vocational application. But the financial rewards from planning are rarely major, and there are doubts over whether anyone moving to complete

a degree now can ever expect to obtain a substantial financial premium over a lifetime as a result.

The immediate consequences of the downturn – in applications and the likely reduction in the number of programmes and concentration in established centres – have already been noted above. It is widely expected that this pattern will be replicated in a number of disciplines and that universities and indeed higher education provision will become increasingly diverse.⁷

Research-intensive universities, where planning has a better chance of survival, are increasingly distinguishing themselves from other institutions. They are widely expected to focus more on STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and medicine – including planning), which still attract state funding for students and where research income is concentrated. Their focus will become increasingly international as they create campuses abroad and enter into collaborative arrangements with other prestigious institutions. As their status rests upon research, it is likely that their distance from practice and practice-based education will increase.²³ Where planning survives, it is likely to be in a very few centres and largely devoted to generating research income.

Planning education will continue, as there is a continuing need to prepare entrants for the profession, as well as enable those within it to continue their lifelong learning. There is some debate as to the sort of institutions will evolve beside the globally competitive, transnational, research-intensive institutions already described.²⁴ There is little doubt that in future we will see a greater diversity of institutions providing higher education. These might include established public universities, some doing some research, others not, adapted more for a walk-in local market than the traditional away-from-home model.

‘At the very least, during the next decade we can expect to see a number of universities ceasing to deliver planning programmes. But we might also see some truly radical challenges for those who are left, and we may see new roles for professional bodies and employers’

The Coalition Government is keen to encourage private providers of higher education, but it is doubtful whether any of the ‘for-profit’ variety would be much interested in something as niche and low value as planning. A not-for-profit institution, perhaps with input and support from employers and the profession(s), might be possible, provided it was multi-disciplinary.

Another possibility is delivery by further education colleges, where costs are lower – or we might even see professional bodies like the RTPi (with the TCPA, I would like to think) obtain degree-

awarding powers and create their own university college.

Another alternative is the possibility of employer-led education and development, accredited by universities (such as my own) which have the capacity to do this sort of thing. Should that sound far-fetched, at the University of Chester we already do just that, with a consortium of housing employers. They meet regularly with one of my colleagues to decide what they need and who is going to do the delivery. We help them translate that into academic credit, assess, and confer the academic awards.

Whatever models of provision are adopted, it is likely there will be far more extensive use of technology in the learning process than there is now, and that there will be greater attention paid to application and the needs of learners than in current models. But there may be fundamental challenges to the way planning and all higher education is delivered as a result of technological innovation and the desire to drive down costs.

This article has sketched out a potentially more diverse future for higher education provision, but there are many who are predicting even greater change.²⁵ Unless you are a reader of the specialist press, you are unlikely to have come across MOOCs (mass online open courses) and the closely related OERs (open educational resources). The starting point for both phenomena was when, in 2001, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology simply put all of its educational programmes online for free for anyone who wanted them. MIT, as an Ivy League university, has wealthy benefactors who paid for this to happen.

Since then, a number of other institutions have followed suit, mostly in collaborative partnerships, and today anyone in the world with access to the internet can download a degree. The content and technology has improved, and all now also include assessment so a certificate of achievement can be obtained.

At present, few providers are offering accreditation, even though the level of attainment is the same as it is for leading universities. Assessment in most cases is automated, which works well in mathematically based subjects, but not the in the humanities. The enrolments are indeed massive – perhaps 120,000 people starting a course, although drop-out rates equally massive.²⁶

The question is: what does this all mean for established universities? The technology is still in its infancy, but it is expected that advances in artificial intelligence and voice recognition will result in major improvements.²⁷ It is probable that within a decade anyone will be able to speak with their personal virtual tutor, who will guide them through their studies and assess them, possibly for free, but probably for a sum considerably less than that paid

for traditional provision. They will still be able to work as a barista or even trainee planner until they find something better, but will not have the debt that current students carry. If so, what does this mean for universities and their planning schools? We have seen huge promises of change from technology before which have proved less significant in delivery. But there was also a time when a man walked in front of a car with a red flag, and there was little appreciation then of the way cars might subsequently mould everyone's lives.

At the very least, during the next decade we can expect to see a number of universities ceasing to deliver planning programmes. But we might also see some truly radical challenges for those who are left, and we may see new roles for professional bodies and employers. There are opportunities to create more flexible learning patterns, integrating practice in the workplace more closely with formal classroom teaching, at less cost. But this is likely to involve major changes in the way universities operate and the roles that academics perform.

● **Jon Talbot** is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Work Related Studies, University of Chester. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

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