Planning practice and academic research – views from the parallel worlds

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Planning research and planning practice

• This presentation reports on one part of a research project by Paul Burton, (Griffith), Robert Freestone (UNSW) and myself (RMIT).

• An extensive on-line survey of Australian and NZ planners which gathered over 200 responses

• Focus here is the particular issue of the research/practice divide.
Outline of presentation

• The idea for the survey – its origins
• The problem – barriers in the research/practice divide
• The survey - methodology and response
• The findings – academics and practitioners
• Resonance with recent European research
• Conclusions
Origin of the survey

• Inspired by Klaus Kunzmann at AESOP in 2015 and his collaboration with Martina Koll-Schretzenmayer, reported in *disP* (51, 1, 2015)

• They surveyed 34 planners across Europe on 6 big questions.

• They found a growing gulf between theory and practice
  – Practitioners less involved in teaching at universities
  – English language publishing not widely read or relevant.
Barriers impeding the take up of academic research

• Taylor and Hurley (2015) showed practicing planners rarely use published research

• Major barriers:
  – access, pay walls
  – language and topics too theoretical and obscure
  – research takes too long
  – findings unclear, equivocating or politically unpalatable.

• Yet both aim to improve the planning world … and are often publicly funded.
The survey

We asked planners in Australia and New Zealand questions on 3 topics:

– The relationship and relevance of theory and research to practice and policy
– The general state of planning, current challenges and confidence in meeting them
– The state of planning education.

• Here we will focus on the first area.
The survey - methods

• We promoted the online survey through an email list - RePlan used by 350 planners in Australasia.

• We asked 20 questions - a mix of closed and open

• Some questions were asked only of one group (i.e. academics or practitioners).

• The survey was conducted using Qualtrics

• Open ended questions were analysed using Nvivo software.
The survey – our respondents

• We had 255 respondents although not all completed all questions.

• 69% (160 of 233) were planning practitioners and 31% (73) were academics.

• The largest group of practitioners worked in the public sector

• The gender distribution was more even:
  – 53% (116) male
  – 45% (98) female
  – 2% (3) not wishing to nominate
Importance of the issues – general agreement
Academics’ relationships 1

• The academics were positive about their relationships to the profession (56 answered).

• Academics felt they had good connections with the planning profession:
  – 66% agreed or strongly agreed
  – 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed
  – 18% were neutral.

• Academics had fewer connections to the development industry:
  – 27% agreed or strongly agreed on close ties
  – 43% disagreed or strongly disagreed
  – 30% were neutral.
Academics’ relationships 2

• Academics were confident of the usefulness of their research:
  – 66% agreeing or strongly agreeing
  – Only 5% thought it wasn’t and 29% were neutral.
Academics’ relationships 3  
– target audiences for their research

• Just over half the academics (52%) said they wrote for both academics and practitioners

• 20% said that their research was primarily for an academic audience only

• This was because:
  – “this is determined by the publish or perish game rule at today’s universities”
  – “the better quality journals are not the practitioner ones”

• Some targeted other audiences: communities and the grassroots, students or international audience
Practitioners’ relationships 1

• Practitioners were equivocal about their relations with academics:
  – 38% (of 98) had good connections with academics
  – 34% didn’t, and the largest proportion neutral
Practitioners’ relationships 2 - use of research

• Did they use academic research?
  – 54% agreed or they did
  – 24% said they didn’t
  – 22% were neutral

• Was it relevant?
  – 46% agreed
  – 21% didn’t
  – 33% were neutral

• So not really relevant for just over half.

• And our sample may be more engaged.
Practitioners’ relationships 3
– improving relevance

• Topics should be different, more useful:
  – “less theory based”
  – “more practically focussed, dealing with pertinent local issues”

• About 20% (of 92) suggested working more closely together for greater relevance:
  – “greater collaboration”
  – “more partnerships”
  – “willingness by academics to present to industry on new or emerging research topics”
Practitioners’ relationships 3
– access to research

• About 25% saw accessibility of research as an issue - readability, as well as access:
  – “much of it needs to be more accessible in terms of its language”
  – “they could set up regular academic research updates, open (and free of charge) – to keep practitioners up to date. This would be beneficial to both sides”
Resonance with European survey 1


- In common:
  - The pressure to publish in high ranking journals not usually read by practitioners
  - The language used in these forums was a barrier.

- For many Europeans writing in English created a barrier to communication with the national profession.

- In the Australasian survey academic jargon and obscure language was a barrier for practitioners.
Resonance with European survey 2

• Kunzmann and Koll-Schretzenmayr found the divide exacerbated by few practitioners teaching

• This was echoed in the Australasian study in answer to questions on planning education

• Many mentioned the need for more practical training - the need for students to get professional experience while studying:
  – “not enough access to the real world – education is too focussed on planning theory”
  – “the gap between theory and practice is astounding”.


Conclusions

• Certainly a research/practice divide.
• Perhaps not so strongly felt as in the European survey.
• But significant constraints for the impact of academic planning research
• Overall, maybe not such a grim picture, more optimistic.
• The gap felt more by practitioners than academics
• But some goodwill all round, and good suggestions

• Watch out for more findings from this survey on other topics.