

# 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-Schretzenmayr, 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

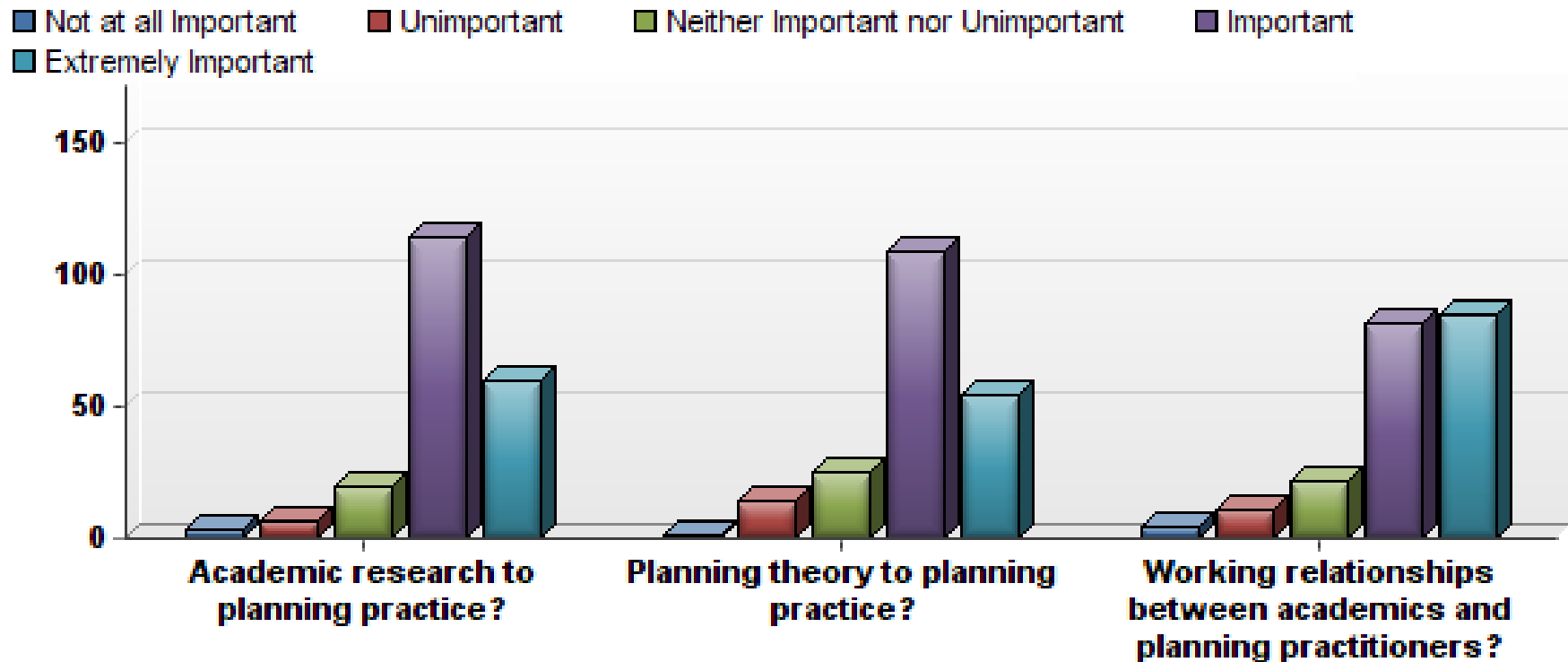
- We promoted the online survey through an email list - RePlan used by 350 planners in Australasia.
- We asked 20 questions - a mix of closed and open
- Some questions were asked only of one group (i.e. academics or practitioners).
- The survey was conducted using Qualtrics
- Open ended questions were 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

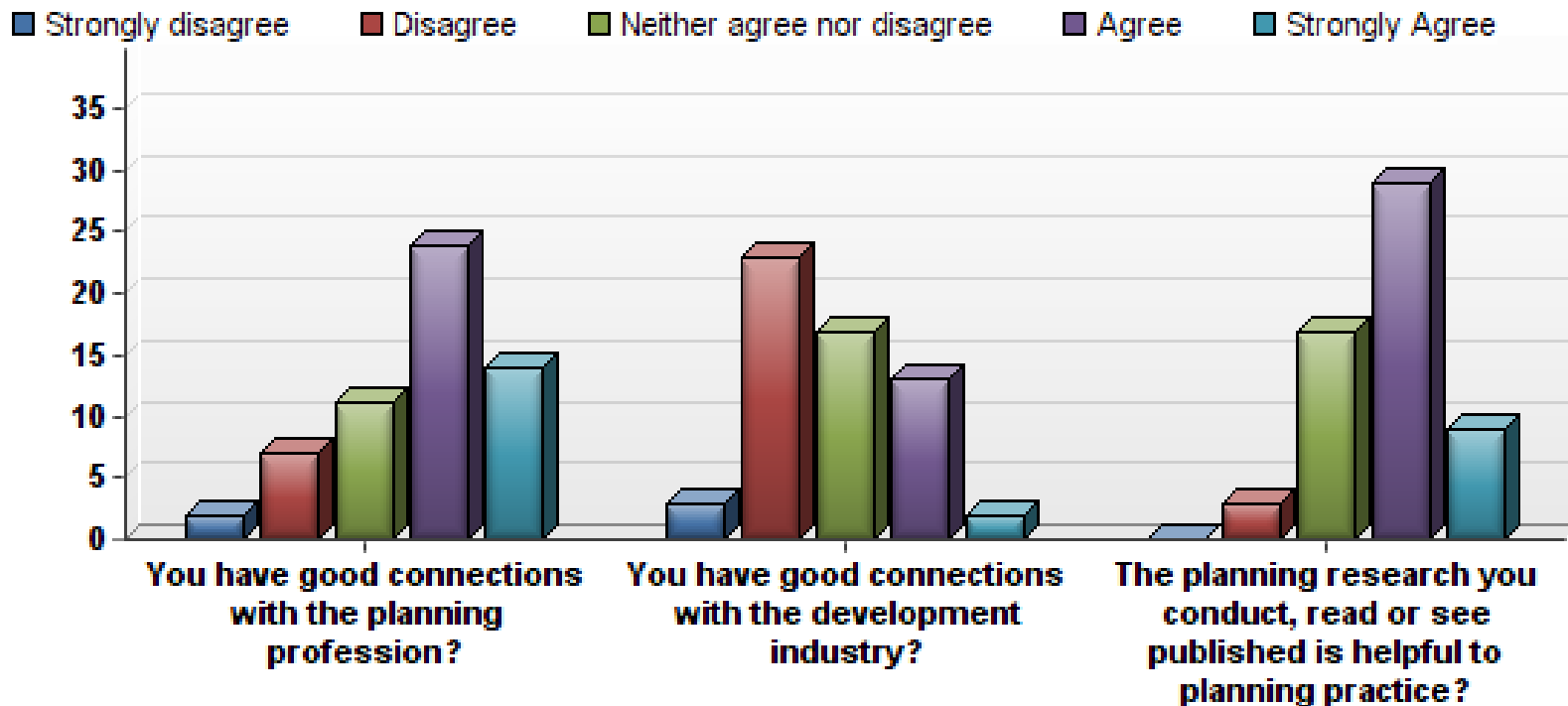


# Academics' relationships 1

- 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.



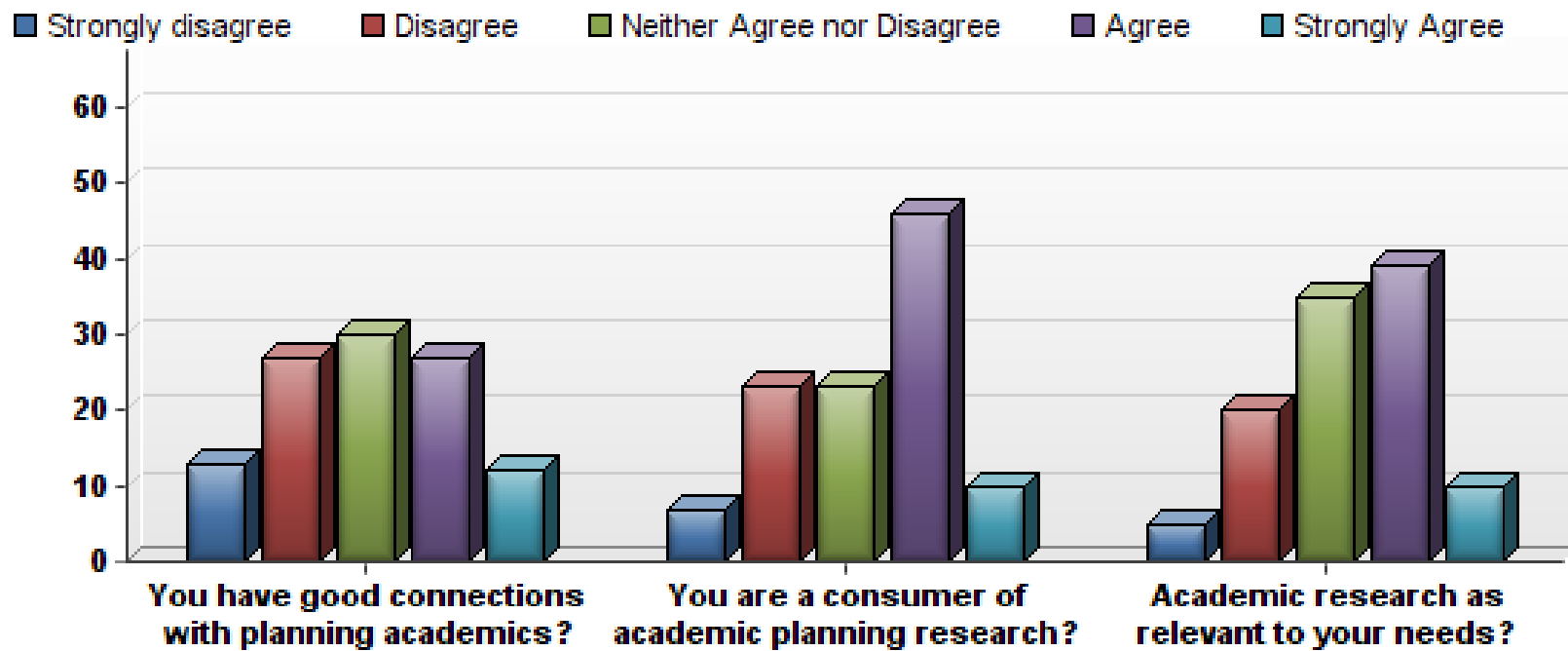
## Academics' relationships 3

### – 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

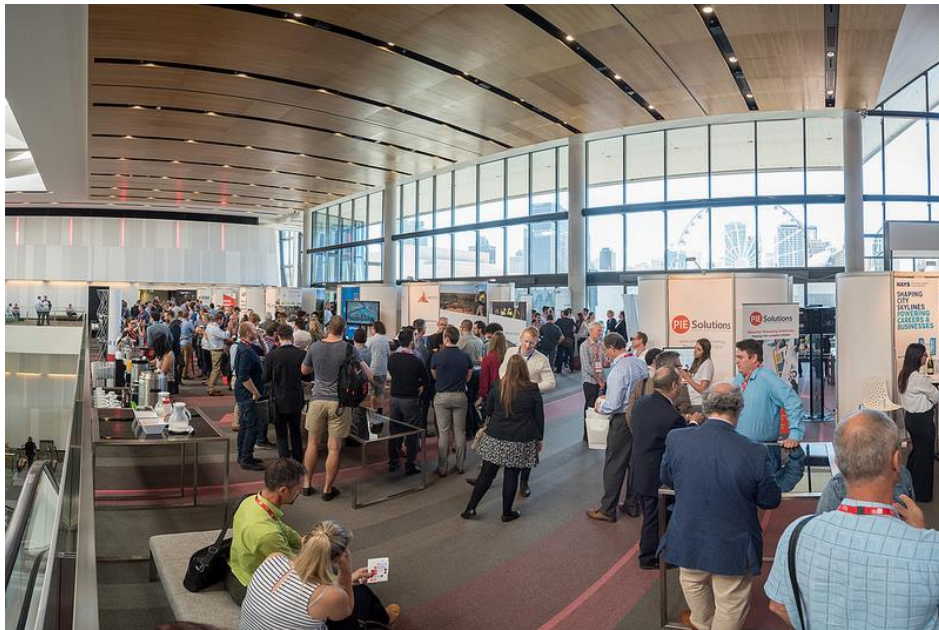
# Practitioners' relationships 1

- 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

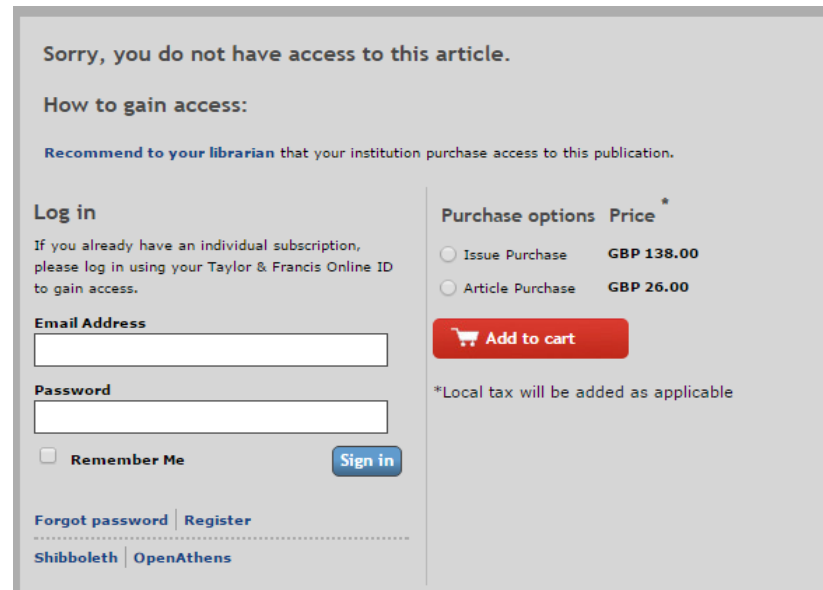
## – improving relevance

- 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”



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# Resonance with European survey 1

- Some similarities and some differences with Kunzmann and Koll-Schretzenmayr (2015).
- 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.