

New planning programs in regional universities: A Sunshine Coast case study

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Professional accreditation

The current Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) accreditation policy is being reviewed. Many of the ideas discussed in the 2008 discussion document (Gurran et al 2008) are already provided as criteria for assessment of Britain's Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) accreditation policy and the RTPI (2004) education policy statement, including provisions relating to the 'educational philosophy' of the program. The RTPI (2004) policy statement places the emphasis on partnership agreements, which are '*...established to manage relations between the Institute and universities or other organisations providing initial planning education*'. The RTPI recognises that some universities may provide specialist education in a distinctive area of planning which augments the basic planning education. In a combined program such as that suggested by RTPI, half the student learning opportunities should focus on core planning elements and one quarter of the student's time should be spent on the specialist area of education. A major benefit of the extra focus on a specialised area is the rich diversity of planning education available to potential students.

For universities, the major benefit of external accreditation is being able to market a professional program in an environment where potential students are very concerned about vocational benefits of education. The reputation of the education program is improved through both planning and coordination of the educational experience and professional accreditation. Over the long term, a university should be able to build on the program strengths as ex-students and other professional planners admire the philosophy and learning outcomes in the program, and encourage the next generations of students to study planning there.

However, there are some difficulties in maintaining the quality of planning programs over time. The University needs to maintain a commitment to the profession and the common goals shared between the profession and the educational program (Gurran et al 2008; RTPI

2004; Thai 1985). The links between the local practitioners and the educational program must be strong and values consistent between the two groups. The support of local professionals is particular important in meeting the needs of students for holiday employment and practicum work.

Another important issue facing professional programs in universities is that professions are not the only influence on the nature and character of professional education. In analysing ideas about accreditation of psychology programs, Kennedy and Innes (2005) note that the profession needs to understand the changing regulatory controls (teaching, research and community engagement) on universities, the response of universities to changing economic circumstances and the demands of students. Bender and Siller (2004), in discussing engineering, suggest that the profession should

not duplicate university assessment processes in evaluating the effectiveness of a professional program (e.g. in teaching, research and community engagement), but should focus on the core knowledge and skills required by graduates to enter the profession. The benefit of Bender and Siller's approach is that a profession has evidence that professional programs of interest to them are being delivered by academics who meet the government and university's requirements as good researchers and teachers. Any profession also has independent criteria on which to base comparisons between various professional educational programs. The debate about what the core knowledge and skills are is occurring in Australia's planning profession (Gurran et al, 2008). However, the parameters of the discussion are still very general. Reasons for that may include the diversity of planning program content and delivery style across Australia and the different demands in each of the state and territory planning systems.

Authors generally agree that professions should focus on identification of the generic knowledge and skills which underpin the discipline (Kennedy and Innes 2005; Bender and Siller 2006; RTPI 2004) and the type/level of professional preparation for the graduate to transition into paid professional employment (Hayes 1996; Bailey and Walker 2000). All recognise the tensions between theoretical and practical approaches in developing disciplinary knowledge, and identifying the core skills and attributes of graduates. All acknowledge the need for lifelong learning in the profession.

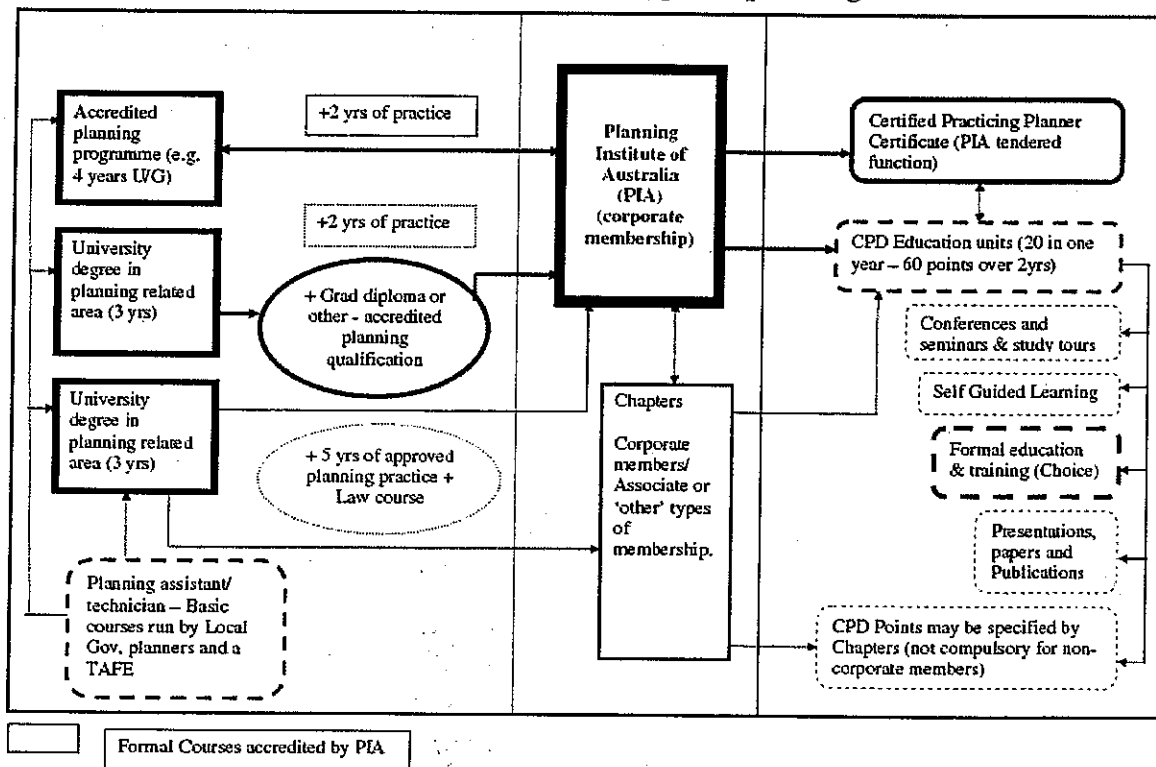
University planning programs being delivered in Australia using different organisational structures. However, it is evident that most planning programs are delivered in multidisciplinary administration units (PIA 2004; Gurran et al 2008), with more limited resources than in the past when planning was taught in stand alone units. Universities and the profession are consistent in recognising that planning program graduates will undertake further vocational training and continuing professional development through their lifetime.

Planning programs are encouraged to develop strong ties with their local planning communities. The partnership would generally include a board or committee able to support planning curriculum development, participate in teaching courses and identify or participate in joint research. However, Gurran et al (2008) question whether the partnership should be wider, with universities participating more actively in providing continuing professional development (CPD) and including local indigenous people in program teaching and research. There are also possibilities to enhance community engagement and outreach.

The PIA's 2008 discussion document about planning (Gurran et al 2008) raises many questions about these issues, but does not provide a university with any firm criteria on which to base decisions about establishing a new program in planning. While the discussion document identifies some of the questions which should be addressed by the profession in terms of balancing initial professional learning at university and future professional development possibilities, the details about core knowledge and skills in planning are still fuzzy after years of debate – which may be one of the characteristics of the planning discipline.

Figure 1 attempts to illustrate the relationship between types of learning and PIA corporate membership and PIA chapters. At the moment, the PIA has a policy about the content of university programs and the Certificate for Planning Practice. However, there is little policy guiding in regard to the content of continuing professional development (CPD) modules, which are selected by practitioners. For example, practitioners never need examine the theoretical debates underpinning the planning discipline once they leave university. The diagram demonstrates that only one part of the lifelong learning outcomes for individual planners is prescribed using the accreditation policy and lists of possible content in planning courses. If there were more precise policy guidelines for planners' lifelong education continued after completion of their university education, the guidelines for university education could be more refined, giving universities greater flexibility about which content is delivered in basic planning education programs. Now that universities are required to audit research and teaching outcomes, it could be argued that such comprehensive lists of professional accreditation requirements could be reduced rather than increased as has been the trend (Appendix A). The expanded list of planning competencies highlights the need for the PIA to identify a process by which an individual practitioner may identify areas for his or her further professional development given that all planning programs will have a slightly different emphasis thus negating the possibility of a universal set of competencies governing planning program curriculum. Appendix B provides a possible model for defining professional competencies to guide practitioners in CPD modules as developed by the RTPPI.

Figure 1: The relationship between the PIA and types of planning education



In the absence of an updated PIA policy about accreditation of university planning programs, it was decided to derive a broad set of criteria to guide our thinking in the development of the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) planning program. We

were influenced by all the recent discussions taking place in the UK, New Zealand and Australia about planning and the role of universities in undergraduate education. The list of considerations derived for the review of USC's BRUP program and this paper (Appendix A), includes the expanded list of planning competencies derived from various recent reports about planning education.

The University of the Sunshine Coast

The University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) was founded to serve the needs of the wider Sunshine Coast community, one of Australia's fastest growing regions. Representatives of the Sunshine Coast region had long lobbied for a university to be established in the area, recognising a need to provide local residents access to tertiary education. It was also thought that the establishment of a university would provide unprecedented economic benefits to the region.

The 2008 *Good Universities Guide*, released in October, described the University of the Sunshine Coast as a five-star performer. The Guide awarded top marks (five stars) for USC's staff qualifications, teaching quality, and graduates' satisfaction with the generic skills they gained while at the University. Graduate surveys indicate that more than 51 % of USC

graduates work in the Sunshine Coast region. Only 21 % of USC graduates work in Brisbane for their first jobs.

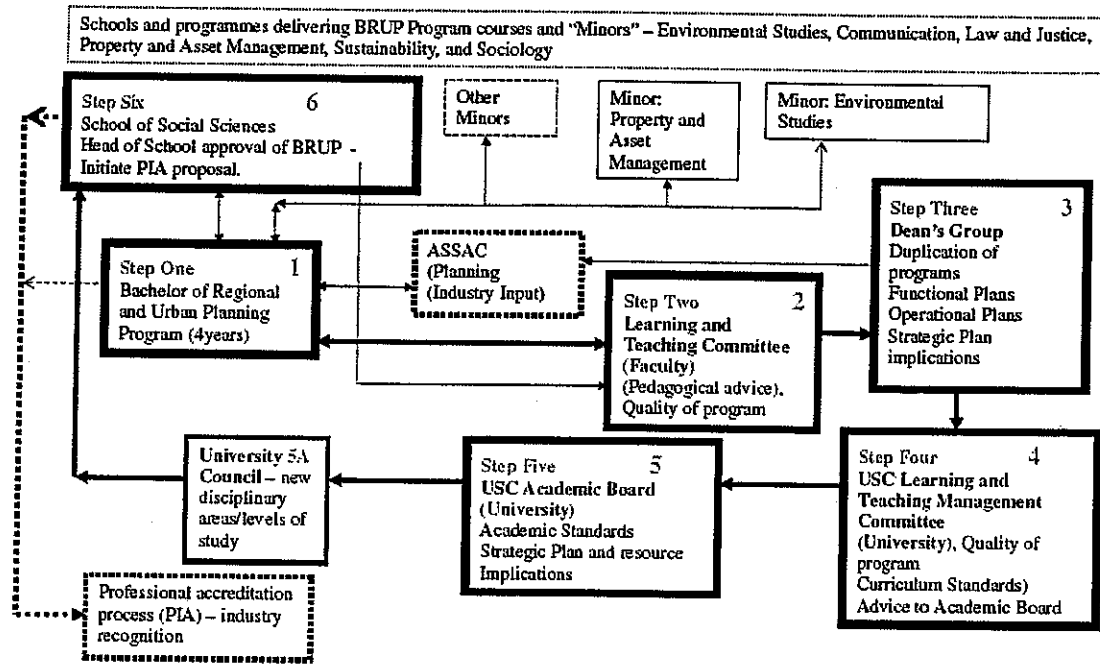
The current three year Bachelor of Regional and Urban Planning was originally introduced to meet the needs of regional stakeholders who wanted graduates able to work in planning offices – in addition to those skills taught in the environmental studies program – one of the foundation programs at USC. The commitment to develop the USC four-year undergraduate BRUP program was made by the University Council as part of a Strategic Plan initiative to develop more professional programs to address knowledge and skill shortages in the Sunshine Coast region. The initiative was strongly supported by planners leading the local authorities who ultimately amalgamated to form the Sunshine Coast Regional Council. All the senior practitioners still serve on the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) Advisory Committee (Planning) which advise the Dean about matters relating to the BRUP program.

All major course and program changes associated with the development of the new BRUP need to meet the requirements of several committees, the Deans Group and Academic Board before the proposal for interim accreditation can be made to the PIA. At each stage of the process, the University is concerned about the quality of student outcomes, links to academic research and the University's Strategic Plan, and lack of duplication of teaching across schools and faculties.

Figure 2 outlines the approvals process within the University, and indicates the nature of decisions made at each stage about the quality of the program, its viability and quality of courses. It is at the Deans Group where decisions are made about a program's resourcing needs over the next three years as part of preparations for the university faculty operational plans (see Figure 3). For planning, this is important

because courses are delivered across all three USC faculties so input is needed into each operational plan.

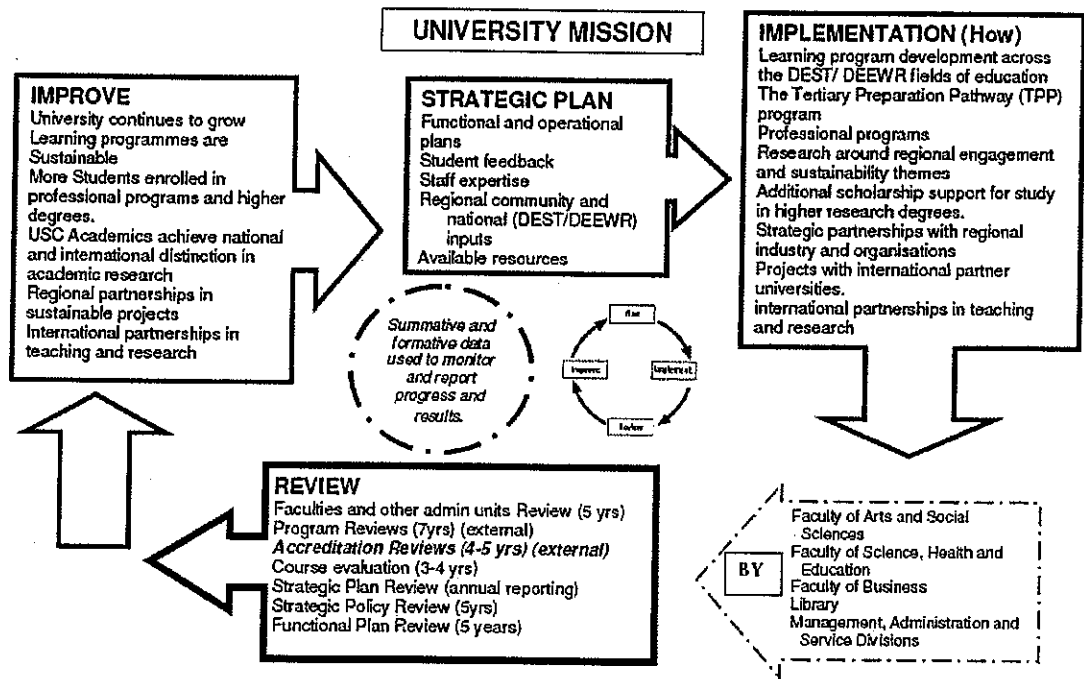
Figure 2: University of the Sunshine Coast – Process for initiating a new planning program (BRUP)



At the time of program development, the operational plans are not yet completed, so specific monitoring criteria are not available. However, we do know that student completion of the planning program should improve university performance in the areas of building externally accredited programs, developing closer partnerships with regional community and growing undergraduate student numbers. However, the planning program will want to see evidence that USC continues to be committed to the planning studios, fieldtrips and additional staff support, as student numbers grow.

The performance of the BRUP program, in terms of its success and effectiveness, will be measured through various university plans. USC uses the PIRI (Plan, Implement, Review, and Improve) planning process – as illustrated in Diagram Three. However, it is still very difficult to derive specific criteria which should drive strategic thinking in the BRUP program because new indicators are being developed by the university at the same time as program development.

Figure 3: University of the Sunshine Coast: Strategic planning cycle (PIRI model)



BRUP program philosophy

The BRUP program aims to achieve teaching and research outcomes, which relate particularly to the USC strategic goals of 'sustainability' and 'regional engagement'. The key areas of emphasis in the new four-year BRUP program are regional land-use and infrastructure planning, protection of natural and built heritage, coastal planning and conflict management and dispute resolution. These are the research areas of the four key staff who teach into the BRUP program. Relevant expertise about property economics and natural resource economics is obtained in courses in other faculties.

Successful completion of the program will equip graduates to work as planners in regional and local planning organisations and in metropolitan councils carrying out a variety of roles including strategic planning, policy-making, infrastructure planning and development assessment in government and private enterprise. Graduates may also be employed in non-government organisations involved in planning activities across a variety of sectors (agricultural, development, tourism and social/community).

The program utilises traditional learning and teaching practices, supported by experiential problem solving in design workshops and studios. Planning theory and practice is based on real issues and case studies, including professional practice examples. Planning practitioners will continue to be involved in course delivery across all years of the program. The details of the BRUP program are provided in Figure 4 below. The diagram shows that each of year consists of eight "course" units, each worth 12 credits. Some advanced courses are double or larger units. In the

fourth year, students may choose a research option for their final year, enabling them to be eligible for other scholarships and possibly pursue a research

pathway. Research students have to work with a PIA accredited practitioner and their supervisor to develop their research topic – replacing the planning practicum.

Figure 4: The four year BRUP program at USC

1	ENP101 Planning Principles and Practice	ENP100 Planning and Environ Studies	INT140 An introduction to Australian Politics:	SCSI30 Intro to Indigenous Australia	COR109	Core	Elective for Minor	Elective for Minor
2	ENP255 (Studio) Urbanism and Urban Design	ENP236 Rural and Regional Sustainability	ENP211 Planning and Environmenta l Law	AUS265 Cultural Heritage Or ENP240 Sustainable Landscapes	ENP245 Landscapes People and Places	PAM210 Property Economics	ENS253 Intro to GIS Or BUS108 Intro to ICT	Minor
3	ENP355 Planning Design Studio	ENP336 Regional Infrastructure Planning	ENP311 (new) Planning Theory	ENP365 (265) Participatio n and Conflict Resolution	ENS3XX Environmental and Resource Economics (12)	SCS225 Social Research (12)	Minor	Minor
4	ENP455 Community Planning Project (24) (new)		ENP411 (renew) Professional Planning Practice (12)	ENP460 Planning Practicum (24) (new)		ENP470 Planning Project (24) (new)		Elective (12)
4	ENP455 Community Planning Project (24) (new)		ENP411 (renew) Professional Planning Practice (12)	CMNS74 Research Design (12)	ENP403 Planning Theses (48)			

When students commence the BRUP program, they will be required to complete two core courses. Core courses provide transferable generic skills relevant to all disciplines at USC. These skills create a foundation for academic study, improve the general knowledge base of graduates and contribute to a positive first year experience. The USC core course – *Communication and Thought* - will be compulsory for planning students, who are then able to choose between two others for their second core course - *Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship* and *Environment, Technology and Sustainability*.

The aim is to teach 50% of all academic credits in the courses which form part of the planning program. Some courses are taught in other faculties and planning students may complete a Minor (four courses) or specialisation in one of seven study areas related to planning (e.g. Sustainability, GIS or Law and Justice).

Within the planning program, two central learning strands (Urban design/planning and Planning practice, theory and law) are dominant, and are the only courses to which entry is controlled using planning pre-requisites. The aim is to use the two strands to build central planning knowledge and skills over four years. All other first, second and third year planning

courses are available to students completing programs in faculties of Arts, Business or Science, who wish to add planning courses to their program as elective subjects or a minor.

Unless external students complete planning pre-requisites, the range of courses available to them is limited to planning courses outside those two central learning strands.

All courses have practical elements. For example, in Planning and Environmental Law, students are required to prepare a development application using Queensland's Integrated Development Assessment System (IDAS) and prepare a planning decision and conditions about a development application. The studio courses all involve workshops and other techniques which enable students to explore real issues related to the design and use of space and 'place making'. Students also complete a planning practicum of 320 hours in the fourth year of the program. Before the practicum, students explore ideas about being a reflective practitioner and establish some of the issues they want to explore through their learning journal. After the practicum, there is a feedback session when students discuss their experiences and lessons learned.

There will be a strong emphasis on development of critical thinking skills associated with being a reflective practitioner. Students will apply relevant technical, practical and process-based skills in their analysis of current planning issues, particularly those challenging the Sunshine Coast – rapid population growth on the coast, timely provision of infrastructure, potential threats to natural and built heritage, the effects of coastal expansion on small towns in the Sunshine Coast hinterland and the conflicts inherent in managing change. The mix of theory and practice is of interest to employers, who seek students with these immediately relevant attributes in the high-demand area of the planning workforce.

USC has strong policies about recognition of prior learning. In the planning discipline, the BRUP program is committed to the provision of a recognizable pathway for paraprofessionals to enrol in BRUP, such as those who are enrolled in the Local Government Association of Queensland Diploma of local Government. Students who have complete the Diploma, are deemed to have completed a significant part of their first year BRUP studies.

The BRUP program will not explicitly provide competencies in some of the areas in the 2008 list of professional competencies. For example students will only acquire the flowing skills in their minor subject area or through research:

- Land Court matters
- Budgeting
- Stress management
- Time management
- How to become an effective consultant planner
- Management practices.

It could be argued that many of the attributes listed could only be learned once graduates had entered the profession and the subjects became real concerns for them. Some attributes, such as time management may be implicitly learned through assessment processes within the BRUP program.

Demand for the BRUP program

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) 2004 report entitled *Findings and Recommendations of the National Inquiry into Planning Education and Employment* and the Queensland Local Government Career Taskforce Association 2007 report *Queensland Planners: Attraction and Retention Survey* both indicate a nationwide and Queensland shortage of planners, and recommend that more planning programs are needed to provide for the significant future shortage of planners in Australia. Since 2001, there has been, on average, a 16% vacancy rate in planning positions, especially in 'seachange' communities (PIA 2004, pi).

With a high regional demand for professionally trained planners, the BRUP program receives considerable support from the Sunshine Coast planning industry and has been designed in conjunction with members of the FASS Advisory Committee (Planning) and the nominated PIA Queensland representative (Assoc Prof Dianne Dredge, of Southern Cross University). The Sunshine Coast Regional Council currently employs a number of undergraduate planning students part-time while they complete their studies. The Council and various practitioners have already committed to supplying 10 industry placements for the Planning Practicum course. The FASS Advisory Committee has provided valuable feedback in identifying the desirable attributes of graduates and knowledge and skills required in the BRUP program content. The current numbers in first, second and third year indicate that interest in the proposed program is growing and will meet the University's criteria for an economically viable program.

Conclusion

Over the last six months, we have established that an accredited undergraduate planning program at USC is economically viable and could meet the accreditation criteria of the current PIA Accreditation Policy. However, the analysis indicates that if an expanded set of accreditation criteria are developed, the PIA needs to be more precise about what the profession's core interests are in monitoring both university planning education options and CPD options. The core knowledge and skills attributes of each planner will vary depending on their initial education and the planning arena in which they work. It is impossible for an undergraduate program to meet all the topics listed in Appendix A.

The quality of teaching and research in all planning programs is also measured within universities as evidenced by the approval process and subsequent monitoring requirements guiding the development of USC's BRUP program. This type of institutional monitoring of teaching and research quality was not explicitly carried out when professions began using accreditation as a means of guaranteeing the quality of graduates entering professions. Like other professional bodies for disciplines such as Engineering and Psychology, the PIA may need to re-visit the core criteria by which

planning programs are assessed, after taking into account university monitoring of teaching and research quality – the quality of which may vary between institutions.

The USC case study highlights some of the issues facing university planning programs facing significant change, while the PIA reviews accreditation criteria and a new university changes its institutional planning and monitoring requirements as it grows and develops.

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