



Subject Benchmark Statement

Town and Country Planning: Draft for consultation

December 2015

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How can I use this document?

This document is a Subject Benchmark Statement for Town and Country Planning that defines what can be expected of a graduate in the subject, in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies.

You may want to read this document if you are:

- involved in the design, delivery and review of programmes of study in town and country planning or related subjects
- a prospective student thinking about studying town and country or a current student of the subject, to find out what may be involved
- an employer, to find out about the knowledge and skills generally expected of a graduate in town and country planning.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Subject Benchmark Statement can be found in the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) glossary.¹

¹ The QAA glossary is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary.

About Subject Benchmark Statements

Subject Benchmark Statements form part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) which sets out the Expectations that all providers of UK higher education reviewed by QAA are required to meet.² They are a component of Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards, which includes the Expectation that higher education providers 'consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements' in order to secure threshold academic standards.³

Subject Benchmark Statements describe the nature of study and the academic standards expected of graduates in specific subject areas, and in respect of particular qualifications. They provide a picture of what graduates in a particular subject might reasonably be expected to know, do and understand at the end of their programme of study.

Subject Benchmark Statements are used as reference points in the design, delivery and review of academic programmes. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not intended to represent a national curriculum in a subject or to prescribe set approaches to teaching, learning or assessment. Instead, they allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design within a framework agreed by the subject community. Further guidance about programme design, development and approval, learning and teaching, assessment of students, and programme monitoring and review is available in Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality of the Quality Code in the following Chapters:⁴

- *Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval*
- *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*
- *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*
- *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review.*

For some subject areas, higher education providers may need to consider other reference points in addition to the Subject Benchmark Statement in designing, delivering and reviewing programmes. These may include requirements set out by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, national occupational standards and industry or employer expectations. In such cases, the Subject Benchmark Statement may provide additional guidance around academic standards not covered by these requirements.⁵ The relationship between academic and professional or regulatory requirements is made clear within individual statements, but it is the responsibility of individual higher education providers to decide how they use this information. The responsibility for academic standards remains with the higher education provider who awards the degree.

Subject Benchmark Statements are written and maintained by subject specialists drawn from and acting on behalf of the subject community. The process is facilitated by QAA. In order to ensure the continuing currency of Subject Benchmark Statements, QAA initiates regular reviews of their content, five years after first publication, and every seven years subsequently.

² The Quality Code, available at www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code, aligns with the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, available at: www.engu.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/ESG_endorsed-with-changed-foreword.pdf.

³ Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a.

⁴ Individual Chapters are available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-b.

⁵ See further Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a.

Relationship to legislation

Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them, for example by funding bodies. The Quality Code does not interpret legislation nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Subject Benchmark Statement where appropriate. Higher education providers are responsible for how they use these resources.⁶

Equality and diversity

The Quality Code embeds consideration of equality and diversity matters throughout. Promoting equality involves treating everyone with equal dignity and worth, while also raising aspirations and supporting achievement for people with diverse requirements, entitlements and backgrounds. An inclusive environment for learning anticipates the varied requirements of learners, and aims to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities. Higher education providers, staff and students all have a role in, and a responsibility for, promoting equality.

Equality of opportunity involves enabling access for people who have differing individual requirements as well as eliminating arbitrary and unnecessary barriers to learning. In addition, disabled students and non-disabled students are offered learning opportunities that are equally accessible to them, by means of inclusive design wherever possible and by means of reasonable individual adjustments wherever necessary.

⁶ See further the *UK Quality Code for Higher Education: General Introduction*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=181.

About this Subject Benchmark Statement

This Subject Benchmark Statement refers to bachelor's degrees with honours and master's degrees in town and country planning.⁷

This version of the Statement forms its third edition, following initial publication of the Subject Benchmark Statement in 2002 and review and revision in 2008.⁸

Note on alignment with higher education sector coding systems

Programmes of study which use this Subject Benchmark Statement as a reference point are generally classified under the following codes in the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS).⁹ This includes the following sub-codes:

- K400 (Planning)
- K410 (Regional Planning)
- K420 (Urban and Rural Planning)
- K421 (Urban Planning)
- K422 (Rural Planning)
- K430 (Planning studies)
- K440 (Urban studies)
- K490 (Planning (Urban, Rural and Regional) not elsewhere classified)
- K900 (Others in Architecture, Building and Planning)
- K990 (Architecture, Building and Planning not elsewhere classified).

Summary of changes from the previous Subject Benchmark Statement (2008)

Given that seven years had passed since the revision of this Subject Benchmark Statement for town and country planning, a review was carried out in order to consider any change of context or other factors that might prompt amendments to the 2007 version of the statement. The review group included a representative from the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), and representatives from a range of higher education providers.

The Statement has been revised and updated to take account of recent developments in town and country planning, as well as wider developments across higher education.

Changes made include minor editorial changes to the main text to give greater consistency and clarity to the Statement.

⁷ Bachelor's degrees are at level 6 in *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and level 10 in *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland*, as published in *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/qualifications.

⁸ Further information is available in the *Recognition scheme for Subject Benchmark Statements*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=190.

⁹ Further information about JACS is available at: www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/1776/649.

1 Introduction

1.1 The purpose of this Statement is to describe the academic standards expected of graduates of bachelor's degrees with honours and master's degrees in Town and Country Planning hereafter referred to as 'planning')¹⁰. It also describes the attributes and capabilities that Planning graduates will have and the nature of teaching, learning and assessment in the subject.

1.2 It will also provide useful guidance where planning is a significant part of a programme's content. Programmes in planning include a variety of delivery models (for example three, 3+1, four or five years, including those with linked undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. It is for higher education providers to explain and justify the particular programme that they have adopted in relation to this Statement and in relation to other changes affecting higher education.

1.3 This Subject Benchmark Statement is primarily designed with undergraduate and integrated master's in mind. However, where higher education providers offer the RTPI term a 'combined master's programme', which combines spatial and specialist elements in a one year 'conversion' type masters to take non-planning graduates on a route to professional accreditation, then higher education providers might like to reflect on the knowledge, understanding and skills outlined in this Statement.

1.4 In most developed societies, the practice of planning is a statutory and professional process that has major impacts on the quality of life of everyone, affects the distribution of resources in society, and directly affects our economic, social and environmental well-being. This professional activity of planning takes place at a variety of scales (local, regional, national and supranational), and within communities in a wide range of forms. In the UK, most planners belong to a professional organisation, the RTPI.

1.5 While the professional requirements for planning programmes have influenced this statement, diversity is an important characteristic of planning as an academic subject. The guidance here is therefore deliberately wider than that required to inform professional accreditation. Providers may, however, wish to use this Statement when meeting the specific accreditation requirements of the RTPI.

1.6 Planning is an activity that has an important role to play in delivering and safeguarding many of the aspirations that civilised societies hold dear: environmental sustainability, social equity, cultural diversity and economic prosperity. It needs committed, talented and creative individuals to help deliver its evolving agenda, working across the private, public and voluntary sectors.

¹⁰ Because of its diversity, planning has been referred to by a variety of terms (including 'spatial planning', 'land-use planning', 'town and country planning', 'town planning', 'city and regional planning', 'urban planning' and so on). In this statement, 'planning' is used as a generic title, and 'planners' as a general term to include all those involved in planning as an activity, whether professional, statutory or otherwise.

Issues for Planning

1.7 Challenges faced by Planning graduates include:

- the deterioration of global and local environments, climate change and impacts of human and natural disasters
- the opportunities and threats posed by globalisation, new technologies and the speed of change
- the regeneration of declining or under-used urban and rural assets
- changing living patterns, and redistributing populations nationally and internationally
- the delivery of sustainable, inclusive and healthy towns and cities
- social polarisation, disadvantage and spatial fragmentation
- meeting the needs of diverse communities.

1.8 Planning generates creative proposals for change, by means of analysis, public participation and co-operative working within a complex web of competing interests. Positive action is at the heart of planning, and it operates within a wide context of environmental, political, social, economic, legal and governance constraints.

1.9 As an academic subject, planning is the study of the way societies plan, design, manage and regulate change in the built and natural environment. It therefore includes the study of why and how (and with what consequences) societies intervene, shape, organise and change natural and built environments, in order to secure an agreed range of social, economic and environmental objectives.

1.10 The academic core of the subject is the study of the rationale for planning and how it is practised. This necessarily involves understanding not only the processes of spatial change in the built and natural environments, but also studying the arguments for intervening in these processes. It requires an understanding of the operation and outcomes of land, property and development markets from a variety of perspectives, including the political, social, economic, financial and legal aspects. It also requires an understanding of design, ecology, natural constraints and the development of sustainable built and natural environments.

2 Defining principles

2.1 A number of principles can be defined that distinguish Planning from other academic subjects.

Planning is concerned with relationships between society and space

2.2 Planning is about determining the quality of the relationships between people and place. Planners are as much concerned with the impact of their decisions on people and communities and on their quality of life as they are with the treatment and development of space. Thus, the roles, aspirations and powers of politicians, professionals, landowners and developers, organisations and community groups, and other communities of interest, are of critical importance within planning; alongside the importance of an awareness of design, and the physical organisation, sustainability and inclusivity of space and place.

Planning is integrative

2.3 A key strength of planning education is its ability to develop and consider the contexts. A key skill of the planner is to synthesise; to recognise the core issues within multifaceted problems; and, based on evidence, to be able to propose focused, effective courses of action, and responses to these problems. Planning is as much concerned with managing the whole environment for the benefit of the whole community, as with the detail of any of its constituent parts. It is recognised that the built environment requires multidisciplinary actors, and that planning's role is one of mediating the multiple interests, within the limits of biocapacity, to achieve the agreed objectives.

Planning manages processes of change through deliberate and positive actions

2.4 Planning is a subject concerned with creating and coordinating action in the environment, and as such requires students to be familiar with a wide range of material, with a view to taking well-informed prescriptive actions in the real world of the built and natural environments. Planners are therefore, first and foremost, creative problem solvers. Planning prescriptions require an understanding of the balances of power within societies and organisations, and the limitations that these impose upon effective planning action.

Planning requires appropriate governance and legal frameworks for implementing action

2.5 Planning invariably involves societies in developing appropriate administrative organisations and processes, to regulate development within legal frameworks related to individual and collective property rights. Knowledge of such frameworks is essential for those wishing to understand planning.

Planning involves the allocation of limited resources

2.6 Planning actions result in changes in the distributions of social, economic and environmental costs and benefits on different individuals and groups within societies. Thus planning requires an evaluation of the likely impacts of decisions, and value judgements about their effects, and how they might be influenced. Planning can be used for oppressive as well as altruistic purposes, and students need an understanding of the political contexts in which each might occur.

Planning requires the study, understanding and application of a diverse set of multidisciplinary knowledge

2.7 Planning requires an understanding of the relationships between underlying theory; conceptual thinking and analysis; and policy formulation, evaluation and implementation. It is an activity whose scope and legitimacy is contested, and in which a variety of justifications and views about its purposes and possible outcomes have to be understood, discussed and reviewed.

3 Knowledge, understanding and skills

Introduction

3.1 Key areas of knowledge and understanding that a planning graduate demonstrates might include the following.

Causes and processes of change in the environment

3.2 A Planning graduate demonstrates knowledge and understanding of:

- processes of socio-economic change and their spatial outcomes
- development processes and the nature of land and property markets
- processes of environmental, ecological and physical change, and associated threats from climate change and natural or human-made disasters
- processes of interaction in and between the built and natural environments
- inter-relationships between land uses, infrastructure and human activities at different scales and changing demographics.

Practice of planning

3.3 A Planning graduate demonstrates knowledge and understanding of:

- impacts and consequences of planning upon individuals, communities and key interest groups
- political and institutional frameworks at all levels, and their procedures
- legal, regulatory and governance arrangements for planning
- plan and policy-making methods, techniques and processes at a variety of scales
- participation and working with diverse communities
- planning as a tool for delivering sustainable and inclusive development
- awareness and understanding of design, including inclusive design issues
- application of knowledge to action, and theory to practice
- the practice of planning in a variety of international institutional, professional, legal and cultural settings
- administrative and management arrangements for effective planning
- management, financing and implementation of planning projects
- interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary working and problem solving
- standards of ethical practice.

Debates in planning

3.4 A Planning graduate demonstrates knowledge and understanding of:

- the development of planning thought and practice
- the philosophical and theoretical explanations underpinning the evolution and practice of planning
- the arguments for and against planning as a part of intervention or non-intervention in processes of societal and environmental change
- substantive theory concerning the processes of societal and environmental change (drawn, for example, from the subjects of geography, sociology, political science, economics and environmental science)
- the conceptual basis of value systems and ethics, and the justification of the choices made in planning in terms of goals, actions and outcomes
- political structures and processes and the nature and use of power.

Subject skills

3.5 Key planning skills that a Planning graduate demonstrates might include:

- academic research and professional investigation in the planning field
- collecting, analysing, evaluating and synthesising planning data and trends
- identification and articulation of planning issues
- translation of theory and knowledge into practical planning policies and actions, including the writing of clear aims and objectives, the formulation, articulation, and evaluation/appraisal of strategies, plans and designs
- creative problem-solving skills and propositions for action
- practical design skills
- monitoring and evaluation of planning interventions and outcomes
- communicating with multiprofessional, multicultural and diverse stakeholders.

Generic skills

3.6 Generic planning skills that a Planning graduate demonstrates might include:

- preparing and presenting arguments and illustrative materials in a variety of presentational formats - written, graphic and oral
- numeracy and use of statistical and quantitative data
- information sourcing, research and literacy
- using information technology in work preparation and presentation
- for spatial analysis, for example using geographic information systems
- creative problem solving
- critical reflection with an understanding of the need for lifelong learning
- managing and producing work to time on an individual basis
- working effectively in and with groups
- being aware of, listening to and evaluating the opinions and values of others
- demonstrating an ability to exercise initiative, original thought and independence, within a system of personal values
- negotiating, facilitating, leadership, advocacy and networking skills
- the ability to work in a diverse (multiprofessional/multicultural) working environment.

Specialist skills and knowledge

3.7 In addition to a defined set of core knowledge, understanding and skills, Planning programmes generally expect students to obtain specialist in-depth knowledge and skills in one or more areas of planning activity. This may be a feature of undergraduate programmes, but would normally be an aspect of integrated master's programmes.

4 Teaching, learning and assessment

Teaching strategies

4.1 Learning, teaching and assessment strategies for Planning programmes foster in planning students an enthusiasm for taking responsibility for their learning and developing a lifelong appetite for critical reflection and career development.

4.2 Educational strategies are based around developing a clear, progressive accumulation of the required knowledge, understanding and skills, which enable students to test their own personal development as potential Planning graduates as they progress from level to level.

4.3 Where appropriate, these strategies are developed with advice, collaboration and inputs from suitable professional colleagues in planning practice. Where outside professional assessors are used (that is for such elements as project work, field studies or work placement experience), planning programmes integrate such learning, teaching and assessment procedures within their general programmes of quality assurance, training and assessment, and ensure that they meet the programme's overall standards.

4.4 All forms of teaching and learning actively involve the student, and seek to build upon its traditions of planning project-based work. Individual student coursework, undertaken both on its own and in group working situations, is particularly to be encouraged within planning programmes. Community based projects that help broaden the student's understanding of the social, attitudinal and physical barriers to inclusion are also encouraged.

4.5 Graduates generally complete at least one major piece of work that demonstrates their individual capacity for reflective, self-directed learning.

Resources to support learning and teaching

4.6 Planning programmes require a comprehensive teaching and learning resource base, equipped to deliver effectively the wide range of learning outcomes. A well founded planning programme has:

- a variety of teaching and learning spaces, including spaces for project work
- a diverse range of situations and locations, including, where appropriate, the use of the professional workplace for case studies, field work and study placement opportunities and other learning outside the classroom
- a wide variety of learning resources, such as: specialist information sources: information technology and online teaching and learning environments; graphics, multimedia, and audiovisual and recording facilities.

5 Benchmark standards

5.1 The standards apply to all the areas of knowledge, understanding and skills outlined previously. The intention is that the standards are used as a means to assess particular student learning outcomes for which planning programmes have responsibility. In this regard, as the standards are generic rather than specific to particular areas of planning, they can be applied across a diverse range of programme requirements.

5.2 It is not expected, however, that students perform at the suggested level of attainment in all aspects of every given standard.

5.3 Threshold, typical and excellent standards for bachelor's degrees with honours students and threshold and typical integrated master's degrees are specified.

Threshold standard

5.4 This is the minimum requirement that graduates of a bachelor's degree with honours reach:

- i demonstrate understanding in the treatment and exposition of the subject matter, making connections between the different areas of the curriculum
- ii evaluate arguments for planning as a form of action within processes of change
- iii evaluate political, legal, governance institutional and administrative frameworks and procedures in planning
- iv exhibit an understanding of the complexities of planning issues
- v demonstrate an understanding of theory and make appropriate connections between theory and practice
- vi demonstrate an understanding of the place of values and ethics in planning
- vii define and analyse planning problems effectively and appropriately
- viii make use of evidence and information sources
- ix use and evaluate a variety of plan and policy-making methods and processes
- x formulate and propose policies, strategies, design proposals and other courses of action as responses to planning problems
- xi communicate planning information, ideas, principles, arguments and proposals to different stakeholder groups through written, graphic, oral and electronic means and demonstrate written, numeracy, oral, information technology and information literacy skills
- xii demonstrate an understanding of the principles and processes that deliver an inclusive environment
- xiii demonstrate professionalism in undertaking assignments
- xiv work effectively individually and in groups.

Typical standard

5.5 In addition to these standards, typical students demonstrate:

- i understanding and application of the majority of the knowledge components listed above to a good level and with appropriate critical discernment
- ii effective and appropriate application and execution of the majority of the skills listed above showing insight, some initiative, creativity and autonomy.

Excellent standard

5.6 In addition excellent students also demonstrate:

- i understanding and application of the majority of the knowledge components listed above with a high level of originality, insight and critical discernment
- ii effective, fluent and appropriate application and execution of the majority of the skills listed above, showing high levels of insight, initiative, creativity, autonomy and leadership.

Threshold standard - integrated master's degrees

5.7 Threshold and typical students at this level have a similar attainment of knowledge, understanding and skills as typical students at bachelor's level.

5.8 In addition to having comprehensive knowledge of planning as a subject and as an activity, they also demonstrate:

- i a good in-depth knowledge in one or more areas of planning activity and practice
- ii a good awareness and understanding of professional working, roles, responsibilities, ethics and values
- iii professionalism in undertaking assignments
- iv an understanding of the application of alternative methods of information retrieval, data collection and analysis.

5.9 Threshold students at this level demonstrate:

- i a questioning and critical approach
- ii a capacity for critical reflection
- iii a capacity for independent thinking and action.

Typical standard

5.10 In addition, typical students demonstrate:

- i a well developed capacity for independent thinking, critical reflection and verbal, written and visual communication
- ii a well developed capacity for producing creative solutions to problems, team working and leadership
- iii an ability to synthesis and integrate concepts and ideas and to relate them to practical contexts.

Excellent standard

5.11 Excellent students consistently demonstrate a high level of originality, insight and critical reflection in all of the above characteristics.

Appendix 1: Membership of the benchmarking and review groups for the Subject Benchmark Statement for town and country planning

Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for town and country planning (2015)

Ms Janet Askew	University of the West of England
Professor Nick Bailey	University of Westminster
Professor Georgia Butina Watson (Chair)	Oxford Brookes University
Dr Ben Clifford	University College London
Mr Andrew Close	RTPI
Professor John Flint	University of Sheffield
Dr Andrea Frank	Cardiff University
Ms Catherine Goumal	RTPI
Professor David Shaw	University of Liverpool
Dr Malcolm Tait	University of Sheffield
Dr Tim Townshend	Newcastle University

Student reader

James Coe	University of Liverpool
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QAA officer

Helen Kealy	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
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Membership of the review group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for town and country planning (2008)

Details provided below are as published in the second edition of the Subject Benchmark Statement.

Professor J Alden	Cardiff University
Ms J Askew	University of the West of England, Bristol
Professor N Bailey	University of Westminster
Professor M Carmona (Chair)	University College London
Professor Angela Hull	Heriot-Watt University
Ms S Percy	Royal Town Planning Institute
Professor D Shaw	University of Liverpool
Dr S Tiesdell	University of Glasgow
Professor C Webster	Cardiff University

Membership of the original benchmarking group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for town and country planning (2002)

Details below are as published in the original Subject Benchmark Statement for town and country planning.

Professor J Alden (Chair)	Cardiff University
Mr J Boggan (Secretary to Panel)	Cardiff University
Ms C Booth	Sheffield Hallam University
Mr R Bristow	University of Manchester
Dr M Carmona	University College London
Professor C Couch	Liverpool John Moores University
Professor A Crook	University of Sheffield
Mr J Derounian	University of Gloucestershire
Professor B Field	De Montfort University
Professor A Hull	University of the West of England, Bristol
Mrs B Illsley	University of Dundee
Ms S Percy	South Bank University
Dr S Tiesdell	University of Aberdeen

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