



The Henry Halloran Trust

Research Report



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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Facilitating Professional Engagement with Planning Research

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CONTEXT

The context for this project is the limited connectivity between applied planning research and professional planning practice.

There is evidence of limited engagement by professional planners with research outputs. There is also concern within the academic and professional community regarding the lack of knowledge transfer between research and practice. This was implied, for example, by recent commentary in the journal *Urban Policy and Research* and in debates in a dedicated plenary session entitled “Who cares about Australian Urban Research?” at the 2013 State of Australian Cities Conference.

An assumption guiding planning research, and this research project, is that sound evidence is useful if not essential to inform good planning practice. This assumption does not hold for all planning practice - statutory planning and other policy implementation activities are, for example, largely informed by existing policy frameworks. However, in most strategic planning or policy development contexts (including statutory reform), an argument for the relevance of an evidence base can be made.

However, given the political and participatory environment in which planning practice operates, the role for evidence in consensus-driven decision making is far from clear. There is a limited understanding around if and how empirical understanding plays a role in planning practice.

SOURCES

The project explored barriers to, and opportunities for, better connecting professional planning practice with

applied planning research. We examined disconnections between the assumed role of planning evidence, and the reality it occupies in planning practice.

In addition to a review of literature on evidence based practice, the work had three elements.

- A desktop review of existing opportunities for information exchange in the planning sector and best practice examples from related sectors.
- Interviews with 14 planning professionals and academics.
- A focus group conducted with 7 planning professionals.

Respondents included local government planners, private sector planners, state government planners, and planning academics. Several respondents had professional experience across more than one of these sectors.

MAIN FINDINGS

While not all research aims to directly inform practice, there is a significant amount of applied urban research produced that has discernible implications for policy and practice. However, the project highlighted that researchers and practitioners operate within very different spaces and have different uses for planning related information.

Practitioners are typically focused on one place and time and are accountable to the public and to notions of fairness and decisiveness. Academic researchers, however, commonly compare across places and times, and are accountable to notions of rigour and accuracy. Further, a basic tension exists for researchers between an interest in keeping closer in contact with

practitioners, and discomfort concerning the goals and scholarly integrity of practice-oriented work.

Barriers to exchange

Access: Researchers face drivers that focus their publishing attention on academic journals. Therefore, unfortunately much of the research base that could inform and improve professional planning practice is contained in fee-for-access databases. We found that professionals rarely access such material.

Style: Academic research publications are typically poorly tailored for a professional audience. The lack of audience focus in academic language can “intimidate professionals” who prioritise quick, clear responses with which to navigate the practice landscape.

Time pressures: A common theme was the time pressures faced by practitioners, with one participant describing statutory planners as being “in the trenches with the bullets over their head”. Therefore, even where practitioners can see the value of engaging with research material, they rarely have the time to do so in depth. As one participant commented “when you’ve got a couple of hours a week you can devote to reading, you’re very limited in what you can take in”.

Scepticism: There is also a degree of scepticism about the relevance of research amongst many professionals. Most respondents reported this scepticism in the third person and saw this as barrier to the use of research. Researchers are often characterised within the profession as “problematic nay-sayers”; while research is cast as too “up in the sky” and “irrelevant to what practitioners do”. A number of respondents suggested there is a culture of ‘accepted knowledge’ and not of staying abreast of current knowledge and best practice.

Politics: Planners often by necessity are focused on their own policy frameworks and political pressures. A central theme emerging from participants was the challenge of working within a political space. The level of accountability that planners have to politicians and to the public means they need to constantly translate often complex information and policy ideas into simple, uncontroversial communication. For example, in explaining the need for simple language, one local government planner said that “as a planner, my client is my councillors. I have a brand new market every 3 years.” Another stated that research was rarely relevant to their work as they “serve political masters and need to be a political operator”.

Competing information sources

There was general agreement that professionals did not regularly engage with applied planning research. Respondents reported that across the profession the most utilised means for accessing knowledge were professional networks and professional publications. Decisions are more typically based on experience and general views on ‘what seems to work’, rather than on research.

The kinds of information relied on by practitioners for regular updates had some key elements: audience focused; a hierarchy of detail; clear and succinct summaries with links for those interested; and framed topics.

The specific space where research being undertaken on planning issues – generating comparative, empirically based knowledge – is made available and digestible to planning practitioners occupies a very small space in information exchange.

Despite these barriers and competing sources of information, nearly all respondents valued research in principle. Many mentioned concerns

that planning does not make enough use of research evidence in decision-making; while all saw the importance of engaging with research to maintain professional competence. Participants pointed to many instances where evidence based research was being used to inform practice. However, the means of engagement was mostly indirect: either relying on recent graduates; or by outsourcing research-informed work to specialist consultants.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The project highlighted the extent to which the resources required to digest research and apply it to planning practice can be underestimated. Significant barriers exist to the exchange of information between research and practice – both practical and political. These barriers make it harder for research informed decision-making in practice. A result of this is a significant role for consultants.

One means of helping to bridge the research-practice divide is to invest in making research outputs more accessible and targeted to a practitioner audience. This is commonly facilitated by research-to-practice websites. Research-to-practice information is a specialist space occupied not often by academics, but

by various services that seek to facilitate practitioner engagement by condensing and making more accessible the traditional outcomes of research.

Research-to-practice websites, although somewhat effortless in appearance, are resource intensive. However, a quality service, with a strong partnership and engagement strategy, would have the potential to significantly improve the use of applied planning research in practice.

A further implication from the project is to highlight the importance of professional cultural norms and practices in relation to research. This project points to the disconnections between the assumed role of planning evidence, and the reality it occupies. Future research effort could be made to further examine the role of evidence in the democratic context of planning practice.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This paper is based on The Henry Halloran Trust Practitioner in Residence Project

The full paper from this project can be found on The Henry Halloran Trust website:

<http://sydney.edu.au/halloran/programs/index.shtml>

For further information about the Practitioner-in-Residence Program please contact:

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About the Trust

The University of Sydney, through the generous gift of Warren Halloran, has established the Trust in honour of Henry Halloran who was an active advocate for town planning in the first half of the twentieth century.

The objective of this trust is to promote scholarship, innovation and research in town planning, urban development and land management. This will be achieved through collaborative cross-disciplinary and industry research that will generate innovative approaches to urban and regional policy, planning and development issues.

