

**TRANSPORT PLANNING SKILLS
INITIATIVE**

**Results of the Focus Group Survey of
Undergraduates on Careers in
Transport Planning**

Executive Summary

February 2003

Prepared for:

Transport Planning Skills Initiative

Prepared by:

MVA

About the Transport Planning Skills Initiative

Delivering sustainable and integrated transport systems for the future is one of the major challenges facing the world over the next decade and beyond. Making sure that there are enough skilled practitioners to take forward this mission is fundamental to achieving this, whilst sustaining a successful economy and the daily needs of a vibrant society.

The Transport Planning Skills Initiative (TPSI) has been created to provide a clear focus for a programme of action to increase the number of transport planners in the UK, who will need the range and depth of skills essential for the effective delivery of the Government's Ten Year Transport Plan, the transport strategies of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and implementation locally through Local Transport Plans.

The initiative is being managed under the auspices of the Transport Planning Society by a Management Group drawn from the professional institutions, employers, training providers and the Department for Transport.

The specific objectives of the initiative are:

- To increase the size of the skills pool
- To increase the range and level of skills
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TPSI is seeking to raise awareness of transport planning as a career particularly among sixth formers and undergraduates, as well as professionals with other backgrounds but who may wish to move into the transport field. The initiative is also seeking to provide broader, more accessible and reactive provision of education for new entrants and training for the Continuing Professional Development of those people already working in the field.

- To raise awareness of the profession among the public and among opinion makers

The Transport Planning Skills Initiative

is co-ordinated by the

Transport Planning *Society*

For a copy of the TPSI Action Plan and information on how you can support the Initiative please contact:

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Acknowledgement

This Survey of Undergraduates was conducted by MVA as part of their support for, and contribution, to the Transport Planning Skills Initiative. It is a very important piece of research which will help inform the strategy and future direction of the Initiative especially in shaping ideas for promoting courses in transport planning and a subsequent career in the profession.

The Management Group of the TPSI would like to acknowledge the considerable time and other resources that MVA has put into this survey and the analysis of the results. Thanks go especially to Melanie Carr and Mick Roberts. Thanks also go to all the students at the three universities who took the time to take part in the Focus Groups.

This Executive Summary is free of charge to TPSI Sponsors. Others may order a hard copy from Andy Costain at the email address opposite at a price of £30.

Executive Summary

Introduction

A serious shortage in the number of trained transport planners has been identified, threatening the delivery of central and local government transport policy.

The Transport Planning Skills Initiative has been created to provide a clear focus for a programme of action to address this need.

A comprehensive plan of action has been developed to meet these objectives. This research provides an input to Task 4 – Careers Advice. The purpose of Task 4 is to enhance careers advice so as to encourage increased entry to the Transport Planning profession amongst school leavers, technicians, undergraduates and postgraduates.

Objectives

The specific objectives of this research with undergraduate students were as follows:

- To explore how undergraduates make career decisions;
- To establish how undergraduates currently perceive the transport planning profession;
- To investigate how the publicity and image of transport planning can be improved; and
- To find out what would encourage undergraduates to embark on a transport planning career.

Methodology

Three universities were invited to take part in the research as follows:

- A university that offers a Masters Course in Transport under the National Masters Training Package (NMTP) programme – Leeds;
- A university that offers postgraduate transport training but not under the NMTP – Salford; and
- A university that offers no specialist postgraduate transport planning training – Nottingham.

One focus group was carried out at each university in November 2002. Recruitment was undertaken in liaison with the Careers Advice Centre in each university. Recruitment was targeted as follows:

- A mix of final year undergraduate students studying relevant subjects including: Economics, Geography, Engineering, Social Sciences, Maths, Statistics;
- Students who are actively thinking about career options; and
- A mix of demographic characteristics.

Career Choice

Although some students had some ideas about future career options, many were still unsure about what they will be doing after finishing university.

The University Careers Service are very proactive in letting students know about career presentations and opportunities and are available to give advice to students. Some students use the service more than others. Other sources of information about careers mentioned were:

- The Internet;
- Newspapers; and

- Job Fairs.

It was reported that there is no shortage of careers information but students find it difficult to find the time to research all the options because of their studies.

There is considerable pressure on students to apply for graduate vacancies with many of the larger companies because early deadlines are set. The process is very time consuming and students complained they do not have time to consider all the information available. Some choose to concentrate on their studies rather than applying for lots of graduate vacancies.

A wide range of factors are important in choosing a career and some students put more emphasis on some aspects than others. Some of the most important factors were:

- Job satisfaction – a challenge;
- Salary and future earning prospects;
- Professional training opportunities;
- Working hours (being able to enjoy life outside work as well).

Some students do not expect that their first job will be in the area that they want to be in. They felt they may need to take several career steps before finding a job they want to settle with.

Some students wanted to take a year out after their degree and felt that it is a good idea if employers are willing to defer starting for a year.

Although some students were interested in the possibility of doing a Masters degree, many indicated that ideally they would like to get some work experience first. This would give them the opportunity to earn some money, gain some practical skills and help them decide which Masters degree would be most appropriate.

Expectations of starting salaries ranged from £14 – 20,000 with a first degree to £22-25,000 with a Masters degree. There were higher expectations of starting salaries for jobs based in London.

Attitudes/Concerns about Transport

Many of the students had a good level of awareness of transport issues and realised the importance of solving many of the problems with transport in the UK for the sake of the economy and public sector services. They tended to be pessimistic about the possibility of finding solutions.

The Image of Transport Planning

On the whole, students had little awareness of the transport planning profession. Most did not know what the role of a transport planner would be. Although some did not know who transport planners would work for, others very much associated it with the public sector.

Students did not have a clear picture of what type of person a transport planner would be. Those that ventured a guess felt it would be male dominated, mostly with older *men 'in suits'*, called '*Frank*', who are a bit '*geeky*'/'*nerdy*'.

There was a concern that although transport planning would definitely offer a challenge as a career, it may also be quite frustrating because it would be difficult to make a difference and improvements would be limited by funding. Some also felt that transport is very politically led and this would also cause frustrations for those working in the area.

When prompted to consider the type of people that would work on large scale Transport schemes and projects such as the Channel Tunnel or congestion charging in London, most students recognised that such projects would require a wide variety of skills. They did not, however, identify people working on these projects as transport planners. Instead, they saw them as a group of professionals from a range of disciplines e.g. economists, lawyers, project managers, that happen to be working on a transport project.

Students felt that transport planning as a profession lacks any kind of image because there is a complete lack of information about it. Others felt the image is negative and unglamorous.

When students were provided with information about transport planning they were surprised at how broad it is. They found it confusing to think of it as a single discipline, however. It is clear that there are many different strands to the work but it is confusing to understand how they all link together under the banner of transport planning.

Improving Publicity and the Image of Transport Planning

There was general agreement that there needs to be more publicity about transport planning to encourage students to consider it as a career option. A variety of methods for achieving this were suggested:

- Career presentations, posters, open days, stalls at careers fairs;
- Advertise in the Hobson's/Prospects graduate directory;
- TV advertising campaign, similar to police, teaching and nursing – with a catchy slogan;
- More pro-active promotion within universities offering transport courses;
- Offer internships for undergraduates at the end of their 2nd year.

It will be very important to promote a positive image for transport planning. It will be important to consider the people involved in promotion to create a young, vibrant and interesting image. It needs to be seen as new, dynamic and exciting. The fact that opportunities exist in the private and public sectors is important.

Promotion should also focus on transport planning successes so that students realise what can be achieved. Some issues like tackling rural access can be used to generate interest.

Another important message to get across is that students from a wide variety of backgrounds have opportunities within transport planning. Students in the groups were surprised there would be opportunities for students with their backgrounds in transport planning.

Many students felt that the message about the shortage of transport planners is important to get across to students in a positive way. Graduates will find it encouraging to think that they stand a good chance of getting a job, but they also don't want to feel that no one else wants to do it and employers are desperate.

A few students suggested that there may be scope for re-naming the profession to make it sound more appealing and to capture its broad base.

A Career in Transport Planning

Some students in the focus groups were interested to find out more about transport planning as a result of the discussion. They felt positive that transport planning can be promoted successfully to students.

It will be important to make it clear how to enter the profession and to have different options for entry and further training for those that may not wish to continue studying immediately after their first degree.

Although many students would be prepared to consider doing a Masters degree, it was clear that funding will be an important consideration. Many other jobs do not require students to have a Masters degree, and students indicated they are reluctant to start a Masters course immediately after graduating. If it is important for transport planners to have this qualification, employers will need to offer support. This could either take the form of direct funding of course and/or subsistence costs, scholarships or alternatively more flexible employment packages, such as support for part-time study.

Conclusion

It is clear that there is much to be done in promoting transport planning as a career option to undergraduates. There is no strong image of transport planning at the moment and therefore that image needs to be built in a positive manner. It was encouraging that some students involved in the groups indicated they were interested in researching transport planning in more detail. There are other examples of careers that have been successfully re-launched recently e.g. teaching, police, nursing, which could act as a model for transport planning.