



Revising the AESOP Core Curriculum – for the 21st century

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*Revising the AESOP Core Curriculum – for the 21st century**Background*

In 1995, AESOP issued its ‘Statement on European Planning Education’¹ – with the objective of establishing common principles that would foster high-quality planning education provision across Europe. These common principles were encapsulated in a set of requirements forming a Core Curriculum for planning education. Adopted by the AESOP community, these principles served as the basis for the admission of new AESOP member institutions and to promote quality in planning education.

However, as planning is a very dynamic field, planning practice and the profession have changed considerably since 1995. Awareness of issues related to climate change and sustainable development has increased; national and local democracies have evolved; and the digital revolution is profoundly impacting the process and the tools of planning, to mention a few important changes. Furthermore, the Bologna agreement (1999) has changed the academic landscape, offering new possibilities and imposing new constraints on the organisation of planning education. For these reasons, in 2021, AESOP’s ExCo decided to embark on updating the principles eschewed in its Core Curriculum.

Working Group

The working group that was established to progress the project was chaired by Andrea Frank. It began work in October 2021 with the initial stages being conducted via virtual meetings. The working group consisted of representatives of a wide range of AESOP member schools with an interest in planning education and pedagogy:

- Roelof Verhage
- Pantelis Skayannis
- Martina Schretzenmayr
- Robert R. Rocco
- Valeria Fedeli
- Alenka Fifak
- Angélique Chettimparamb
- Artur R. Pires
- Daniel Galland
- Christian Peer

There was little disagreement that the Core Curriculum needed a refresh regarding the format outlined in the 1995 document, which was superseded by the Bologna agreement stipulations and the substantial knowledge and skills required for the 21st-century planning profession in order to respond to emerging societal challenges. The members of the working group formed two sub-groups, with each focusing on one of the following two tasks:

- a) Establishing the motivation for updating the curriculum and particularly establishing the purpose and role of the text within the mission of AESOP
- b) Establishing a process for the update.

Regarding (a) the group concluded that the Core Curriculum plays two crucial, interrelated roles in AESOP: It contributes to defining standards for planning education, and it serves as a touchstone for the admission of new members. This double role imposes conditions on the content of the Core Curriculum. Because of different national situations, the diversity of planning schools applying for membership to AESOP is such that it is not possible, nor desirable, to formalise the Core Curriculum in too much detail. Moreover, planning practice is different in response to national situations. The diversity in approaches to planning that this implies should be considered an asset of planning in Europe, but mutual learning, with respectful and responsible knowledge transfer and emulation of didactical practices, is also highly desirable. Given these observations, rather than a precise list of curriculum elements, the Core Curriculum should take the form of an ‘identity document’. This document aims to do the following:

- Provide a common identity for all AESOP member schools and create an AESOP label to which member schools can adhere.
- Provide a set of minimum requirements in order to be recognised as a planning school, based on common values of democratic accountability, rule of law and citizen engagement.
- Increase the quality and visibility of planning education and contribute to improving the professional recognition of planners educated in AESOP member schools.

Regarding (b) the group decided that there should be broader input into the process via discussion/consultation with a wider commu-

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nity of practice more representative of AESOP to shape the new document. Consultation only on a draft document at a late stage of development was felt inappropriate and also at variance with professional values around collaboration and participation. The language also needs to be more inclusive.

Canvassing stakeholder communities

While it was not considered feasible to conduct fully comprehensive discussions with all groups involved in planning education, the working group arranged a total of four events over approximately 6 months with different groups to gather thoughts and ideas.

April 2022: Heads of Schools meeting in Tirana, Albania

May 2022: Young Academics Conference, Istanbul, Turkey

July 2022: AESOP conference in Tartu, Estonia

October 2022: 58th ISOCARP World Planning Congress in Brussels, Belgium; Special Session “Current challenges for the changing spatial planning profession and education. Core Requirements for Planners’ University Education”

Each meeting was facilitated by various members of the working group and comments were used to further develop the set of requirements. We also received some written comments from people who heard about the process.

A final draft was developed in several rounds over 2023 and presented to ExCo in the late summer. The document was then circulated to the governing council of AESOP for review and discussed at the 2024 Venice Heads of Schools meeting in March 2024. With only minor amendments, the new Core Curriculum was approved unanimously by votes from the Council of Representatives.

Please see the new guidance below. The Core Curriculum text can also be accessed on the AESOP website: <https://aesop-planning.eu/activities/core-curriculum>

This website also provides both versions (1995 and 2024).

AESOP is very interested to hear from you whether the principles outlined in the Core Curriculum are inspiring new curriculum developments or support revisions of your existing curricula.

Please get in touch or speak with one of us at the forthcoming congress in Paris.

Andrea Frank and Martina Schretzenmayr
(on behalf of the working group).

Notes

- 1 AESOP Working Group on the Curriculum of Planning Education (1995), *European Planning Education*, AESOP Statement.

*AESOP Core Curriculum (version 2024)**

1. Role of the AESOP Core Curriculum

The Core Curriculum plays two crucial, interrelated roles for AESOP: It identifies knowledge, competencies and values deemed vital for spatial planners at the start of the 21st century; and it serves as a ‘benchmark’ for the evaluation of applications and admission of new member schools and their education programmes. This dual role poses conditions on the contents of the Core Curriculum. Because of different national situations, the diversity of planning schools applying for membership to AESOP is such that it is neither possible nor desirable to formalise the core curriculum in too much detail. Planning practice differs depending on national, regional, and local contexts. The diversity in ap-

proaches to planning that this implies should be considered an asset rather than a weakness of the planning discipline in Europe. Mutual learning, with respectful and responsible knowledge transfer and emulation of didactical practices is, however, highly desirable. Such mutual learning is further encouraged by the quality recognition programme of AESOP’s Excellence in Education Board. Given this, rather than a precise list of curriculum elements to be met, AESOP’s Core Curriculum aims to:

- Establish a common identity for all member schools, and create an AESOP label, to which member schools can adhere and aspire.
- Provide guidance on knowledge, competencies and common values of democratic accountability, rule of law and citizen engagement

on the basis of which a planning school is recognised by AESOP.

- Increase the quality and visibility of planning education and contribute to improving the professional recognition of planners educated in AESOP member schools.
- Support the exchange between AESOP and other planning associations and networks (e.g., GPEAN) on capacity building for planning at the global level.

2. Knowledge, competencies and values for a Core Curriculum in European Planning Education

Broadly speaking, planners intervene in the organisation of physical and non-physical (e.g., economic) spaces at different scales in order to respond to the needs of human society and the planet. In doing so, planning professionals face complex tasks and challenges including social and spatial injustice; climate change, natural and man-made disasters, resource management and energy transition; a need for inclusive, healthy and sustainable place-making; citizen empowerment and community development; globalisation and digitalisation. The core curriculum for planning programmes specifies the: A) knowledge, B) practical competencies, and C) values that planners have to develop or adhere to in order to respond to these tasks in a socially responsible and professionally ethical manner.

A. Understanding spatial** dynamics across different scales

(Graduates of planning education degree programmes have the capacity to produce, manage, analyse, interpret and communicate knowledge in areas related to spatial planning)

Develop knowledge of:

- *Processes of spatial change in the natural and anthropogenic environments, including its systemic interconnections and the impacts of humans' exploitation notably climate change, biodiversity decline, etc., and how human activities intervene in and modify these processes*
- *Socio-economic dynamics, including social conflicts, inequalities, migration, demographics, cultural change, property and real estate markets and power relations within society*
- *Specialised fields in planning and relationships across and between these fields, from an interdisciplinary perspective (e.g., natural environ-*

ment, built environment, society, economy, law and history)

- *Locational specificities of spatial dynamics*
- *Discourses in society and human agency (e.g., UN Habitat and sustainable development) regarding planning and what is expected from planning, understanding its strategic and holistic aspects*

Develop practical competence in:

- *Experiencing, exploring, and analysing the natural and anthropogenic environment*
- *Scientific literacy (bibliographic research and academic writing)*
- *Techniques of qualitative and quantitative data collection, analysis and synthesis, and assessing data reliability*
- *Using tools of modern information technology; e.g., Big data, GIS and Artificial Intelligence*
- *Systems thinking*
- *Strategic thinking*
- *Anticipating future societal needs through scenario developments or future-casting*
- *Understanding planning interventions and relevant municipal, regional, and state-level finance tools*
- *Working in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary teams*
- *Negotiations and mediations*

Develop an attitude and responsibility for:

- *Curating a critical and ethical mindset towards the production, use and transfer of knowledge, expertise and information in planning and planning-related disciplines*
- *Social and transdisciplinary learning*
- *Stewardship of natural and anthropogenic environments*

B. From knowledge to action

(Graduates of planning education degree programmes have the capacity to conceive, devise and evaluate spatial interventions from a multi-actor perspective)

Develop knowledge of:

- *The nature, purpose, theory and methods of planning*
- *History of planning as an institution and a profession*
- *History of development and performance of planning instruments and awareness of the need to continually update such instruments to respond to new challenges*

- *The actors/stakeholders in planning and the way in which they interact/the way in which the interactions between them are coordinated*
- *Citizen movements and understanding of democratic planning processes*
- *The political, legal, institutional and cultural context and power relations in planning including ideal versus reality of planning and illegality*
- *Transformational technologies, e.g., AI and Internet of Things*
- *Transformative action in the context of sustainable development including adaptation and mitigation, recovery and preparedness in the cases of disasters and climate crisis*
- *Transformative action in the context of spatial injustice*

Develop practical competence in:

- *Appraising and enhancing the value of natural and anthropogenic environments including their preservation and restoration*
- *Thinking in terms of concepts, instruments and measures and management of knowledge for practical application*
- *Integrating different types of knowledges for plan development*
- *Integrating aesthetic and design dimensions in planning proposals*
- *Developing design, drawing and visual representation skills*
- *Devising plans, programmes and measures and guiding the implementation policies*
- *Being in touch with civil society, organising and leading consultations and engaging in cocreation processes with communities, interest groups and stakeholders at various spatial levels*
- *Dealing with governance and managing complexity and change*

Develop an attitude and responsibility for:

- *The value dimension of planning*
- *The ethical implications of planning*
- *The cultural embeddedness of social processes and of collective action*
- *Democratic processes and rights, e.g., 'right to the city'*
- *Protecting the rights of all species and respecting planetary limits*
- *Protecting social justice*

C. Developing a sustainable professional activity

(Graduates of planning education degree programmes are capable of assuming the societal responsibilities of spatial planners)

Develop knowledge of:

- *Professional practices that contribute to spatial planning*
- *Values associated with spatial planning and professional ethical codes*
- *The limits to what planning can achieve and what other disciplines can potentially contribute to solution development and spatial transformation*

Develop practical competence in:

- *Transformational leadership*
- *Skills in social interaction, persuasion, building trust, priority setting, frustration tolerance and goal orientation*
- *Making plans and decisions with a high sense of environmental and social responsibility and the public interest*
- *Reflective practice*
- *Critically reflecting on the consequences and understanding the risks of decisions and actions*

Develop an attitude and responsibility for:

- *Lifelong learning*
- *Open-mindedness*
- *Identifying situations of contradictory injunctions with which planners are confronted and knowing how to position oneself in line with the values of planning*
- *Adopt a reflective and critical stance on professional practices, legal frameworks and planning policies*
- *Expert independence: Making ethical decisions based on knowledge and research, not on temporary politics*

3. Programme structure

As well as fields of knowledges, competencies and attitudes/values outlined earlier, an education in spatial and territorial planning should offer students *opportunities to specialise* in particular areas of planning such as housing, infrastructure, mobility, urban-rural planning, planning for disaster mitigation and resilience, sustainability, regeneration, recreation/tourism, land development, urban design and international or European affairs. There are other suitable specialisms and the listing here is not comprehensive but serves as a sample of possible areas of focus.

To give due attention to the threefold core of the curriculum and any specialism, the education and training of future professional planners requires an intensive programme of study

and education requiring a minimum of 3–6 years of full-time postsecondary education***.

AESOP recognises that in the European context, a range of different planning education programme models exist, both at undergraduate (first-cycle) and postgraduate level (second cycle); there are also planning degree programmes which integrate the two cycles.

As for the programme focus, there should be *adequate exposure to and interaction with planning practice*. Project work and experiential learning situations, i.e., confrontation with re-

al-life planning problems, preferably and possibly with the participation of practitioners in the programme, laboratory exercises in developing planning solutions, a period of intensive in-practice-training i.e., apprenticeship or placement and ‘learning by doing’ are distinguishing features of a fully-fledged, effective planning education.

Third cycle/PhD level education in planning exists but is not necessary for planning practice. It is therefore not covered by this core curriculum document.

* The 2024 Core Curriculum represents an updated version of the Core Curriculum initially issued as part of AESOP’s statement on *European Planning Education*, AESOP Working Group on the Curriculum of Planning Education (1995).

** In some national contexts the term ‘territorial’ is used; both may apply.

*** International Labour Organization (ILO) (2012): *International Standard Classification of Occupations: ISCO – 08, Structure, Group Definitions and Correspondence Tables (Vol 1)*. Geneva: ILO.

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