



Transport planners owe a debt to Richards' skillful leadership

Martin Richards, the Transport Planning Society's director of skills, has been instrumental in raising the profession's status, helping establish a professional development scheme and the transport planning professional qualification. **Geoff Dudley** caught up with him just before his retirement

For many years, transport planning as a profession lacked a qualification that could provide it with an identity in its own right. In this respect, it suffered from unfavourable comparisons with professions carrying chartered status. Since 2008, however, the gap has been filled by a transport planning professional (TPP) qualification, and an interrelated professional development scheme (PDS), which is a structured training scheme designed to equip younger transport planners with most of the range of knowledge and experience required to become a professional transport planner, working to achieve the TPP qualification. The PDS is designed to take around five years to complete, with the TPP award arriving after about another two years.

The TPP is provided jointly by the Transport Planning Society (TPS) and the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT), while the PDS is operated by the TPS alone. The PDS is available without charge to all stakeholder members of the TPS, although a licence is required. Having survived the recession, the TPP and PDS have expanded quickly over the past two years, so that there are now nearly 300 PDS trainees, representing a substantial proportion of the recent graduates joining the profession.

A key figure in the development of both the TPP and PDS is Martin Richards, who retires at the end of June from his position as director for skills at the TPS.

Richards believes the PDS has now become the industry standard for the majority of consultants, and that it is attaining the status of the accepted qualification route for graduates recruited to the profession, with such alternative routes as university Masters courses now becoming less important to employers.

Richards has been involved in the development of the TPP and PDS from the outset, and ever since he retired in 2000 as chairman of the consultancy MVA. In that same year, the Labour Government produced its ten-year plan for transport, which proposed a large and rapid increase in both road and rail investment. The plan caused considerable disquiet within the profession that the necessary transport planning skills required to implement it may not have been available. Richards was already involved in training through an invitation to set up an employers' forum to serve the Masters courses provided by the Universities Transport Partnership but, at the first meeting of the forum, he was approached by a group from the TPS concerned about the lack of planning skills. Consequently, the TPS set up a transport planning skills initiative (TPSI), designed to review the whole profession, and assess the current resources and likely future needs. Supported by the DfT, employers, and other professional bodies, the TPSI was completed in 2004 and, among its findings, identified as a major weakness the lack of a professional qualification.

Richards describes how the plans were then carried forward. "The TPS set about working with the training

body Go Skills to develop national occupational standards for transport planning. These had to be approved by the regulatory body Ofqual, and were signed off in 2007. We were then able to commence operation of the TPP and PDS in April 2008.” The need to mirror the framework for national occupational standards made it necessary to design the scheme in a particular style, but the adherence to national standards helped to establish a professional identity. Consequently, the TPP and PDS each have ten technical units, which relate directly to the ten units of the national occupational standards. They both also have units about generic skills.

Richards stresses that both the TPP and PDS had substantial support from the employers from the outset, so that they themselves played a large part in shaping them, and quickly adopted the PDS after its introduction. “The majority of the major consultants signed up, including AECOM, Arup, Atkins, Mott Macdonald, Mouchel, and Peter Brett Associates,” he says. “In fact, Keith Mitchell, the chairman of Peter Brett, has played a particularly important role throughout the TPSI and the development of the TPP and PDS schemes.” Richards continues: “The consultancies stayed with us through the recession, and it is essentially the employers who drive the schemes forward. The TPS would not wish to introduce any changes that are not approved by the employers, while it is the employers themselves who operate the scheme through the mentoring of trainees.”

Both the TPP and PDS make a distinction between learning and doing. In the case of the PDS, the scheme includes both knowledge and experience objectives but, for the TPP qualification, the knowledge requirements must be satisfied first. These can be achieved by one of four routes: completion of the PDS; an approved transport masters; a portfolio of technical knowledge (for graduates); or a technical report (for non-graduates). The TPP then requires candidates to obtain the breadth and depth of practical experience required to work as a transport planner, while the third and final stage takes the form of a professional review interview, requiring the demonstration of professional competence across a broad range of modes and contexts.

Richards emphasises that a broad range of skills is essential. “You can’t complete the PDS or be awarded the TPP if, for example, all you want to do is modelling or smart travel. People need to gain experience of many aspects, including data, modelling, and scheme assessment. The employers demand this breadth.

“The breadth also applies across spatial contexts. You don’t see the wider geographic scale if you just work on shopping malls and business parks, so you have to demonstrate work across a range of spatial contexts.”

Public-private contrasts

Although most of the large consultants have signed up to the scheme, it is a different story for the public sector. There are only four public sector PDS users, and Richards explains that there are major problems here. “There is a much lower commitment to training in the public sector,” he says. “When I talk to the local authorities, it is very concerning that few of them are recruiting any graduates. One friend told me that many local authorities in their part of the world have nobody in transport planning under 40 years old.

“What adds to the worries is the fact that yet more austerity lies ahead for local government, with associated staffing pressures. I fear therefore that this is an ongoing challenge. Things might be different where combined authorities are created. Here, greater responsibilities could identify the need for a graduate stream.”

In a few public sector cases, the picture is much rosier. For example, Transport for London runs a high quality graduate development scheme based on the PDS, and has taken on a number of new graduates in recent years. Another notable exception to the bleak public sector picture is Leicestershire County Council, and Richards describes the transformation here.

“About three years ago, Leicestershire decided that they had to think about the future. Consequently, they

“Many [employers] now see the Professional Development Scheme as the preferred route, with the Masters courses becoming less important. There is a definite trend towards in-house training.

adopted the PDS and recruited three graduates, and called it their succession plan. They have now increased the number of graduates to five.

“Their commitment is amazing. The trainees at Leicestershire have a fantastic opportunity. They are getting involved in meetings of council members, so it is not just technical training. They are learning how transport is actually administered by politicians, and how decisions are made.”

In contrast to the position in the public sector, Richards believes that, currently, the private sector can meet its recruitment and training requirements.

“I continue to be amazed by the quality of the trainees generally. I haven’t met one who, if I were to be back running MVA, I wouldn’t employ. A lot of bright young people are being attracted into the profession, and the employers seem able to attract the necessary good quality staff.”

A further significant factor in recent years has been a decline in the numbers taking university transport Masters courses. “The vast majority of graduates entering the profession do not have an education in transport. In the past, a number of graduates would have taken transport Masters courses, but UK participation here has been declining, with the result that a number of universities have abandoned courses. Although others are starting new courses, most courses now seem to depend on their foreign intake.

“In the early 2000s, there were many Masters students, but the combination of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council withdrawing funding for Masters students in 2008, and the recession, led to a drop in UK numbers. With the margins for many employers still quite tight, and given that the fees for many Masters courses have gone up, many now see the PDS as the preferred route, with the Masters courses becoming less important. There is therefore a definite trend towards in-house training.”

With the first graduates who will have paid £9,000 a year in undergraduate fees completing their degrees this year, Richards is concerned they won’t be able to fund their own Masters.

An evolving picture

Although the PDS is essentially employer-driven, the TPS in the last couple of years has developed the scheme to not only reflect modern needs, but also to improve quality control. For example, in 2013 Version 3 of the scheme was introduced.

“Although we adopted the national occupational standards, the language of the regulatory body Ofqual could be a bit odd. Some of it was not user-friendly, so we went through the document and changed the text into more trainee-friendly language. We also simplified things generally. Formerly, there had been different routes to completion of the PDS, but now there is one basic route, with some choices between units.”

The importance of employer input into the PDS is reflected in the requirement for each trainee to be assigned a mentor to guide, advise, and assess them. There are now around 233 trained mentors, and from 2014 it became obligatory for each of them to attend a TPS training course.

A further significant element of PDS quality control was also introduced in 2014, in the form of a review process. Richards explains that this was intended to match the processes adopted by the Institution for Civil Engineers, so that a team of five reviewers was appointed (including Richards himself), each of them retired or semi-retired, to operate on a regional basis. It is intended that a reviewer will meet each trainee at least twice while they are on the scheme, once when they have been working on it for around two years, and then at the conclusion.

A check is also made on the work of each mentor. Richards reveals that, perhaps surprisingly, the TPS has found more inconsistency in mentoring within organisations, rather than across different employers. He argues that these inconsistencies emphasise the importance of individual mentoring and the review process for the success of the PDS as a whole, and so confirms the need to develop mentor training. Further consistency is also maintained by the reviewers themselves meeting every six months to compare notes, while they also report to a review manager. In addition, each PDS licensee has a nominated manager, who is the prime contact between the licensee and the TPS. Meetings of PDS managers take place every six months, and this gives employers a further opportunity to provide input. Complementing the PDS management structure, there is a TPP professional standards committee, with ten members, five nominated by each of TPS and CIHT.

Richards is to be succeeded by Keith Buchan as TPS director for skills, and the retiring director reflects that further change is likely to take place on an incremental basis.

“We had the PDS upgrade in 2013. When people are taking at least five years to complete the scheme, you don’t want to change too readily. Employers want stability, with change coming gradually over time. If you want to move the goalposts, then you have to do it with care.” **ltt**

A fitting send-off

The Transport Planning Society presented Martin Richards with an engraved decanter at a ceremony at the Institution of Civil Engineers in London last week, in recognition of his contribution to the profession’s development. Presenting the award, past TPS chair Nick Richardson (*right*) cited Richards’ contribution to the professional development scheme, the Transport Planning Professional qualification, and work on apprenticeships. Richards had given the society “brilliant advice based on a lifetime’s work”, said Richardson. “The TPS owes you an enormous debt, Martin.” Receiving the award, Richards paid tribute to TPS colleagues. “I couldn’t have done it without the support of so many other people,” he said, paying special tribute to Keith Mitchell, chairman of consultant Peter Brett Associates. “Without Keith we wouldn’t have achieved all we achieved.”

