

Research Quality Assessment and Planning Journals.

The Italian Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Assessment of research products is a crucial issue for universities and research institutions faced with internationalization and competition. Disciplines are reacting differently to this challenge, and planning, in its various forms – from urban design to process-oriented sectors – is under strain because the increasingly common assessment procedures based on the number of articles published in ranked journals and on citation data are not generally accepted.

The reputation of journals, the impact of publications, and the profiles of scholars are increasingly defined by means of indexes such as impact factor and citations counts, but these metrics are questioned because they do not take account of all journals and magazines – in particular those published in languages other than English – and they do not consider teaching and other activities typical of academics and which have a real impact on planning practices at the local level.

In Italy the discussion is particularly heated because assessment procedures are recent, the disciplinary community is not used to publishing in ranked international journals, and the Italian literature is not attuned to the international quality criteria.

The paper reviews the recent debate on planning journals and research assessment. It focuses on the Italian case from the perspective of improving current practices.

CHANGING METRICS FOR ASSESSING ACADEMIC PLANNING RESEARCH

A heated debate is in progress in different countries and in diverse journals on the changing metrics used to assess planning research products. It relates to the general adoption in academia of formalized methods to evaluate articles and rank journals by using internationally recognized criteria and procedures. Scientific disciplines, social sciences and the humanities have diverse traditions and different levels of international integration. But a common trend is emerging in the selection of articles to be published and the evaluation of their impact. ‘Citation index’ and ‘impact factor’ have become the buzzwords of research assessment.

The reasons for the change are clear: to improve the quality of research by adopting methods which are comparable across disciplinary sectors and consolidated at the international level. In a competitive scientific environment, universities and research institutions must use sound criteria and reliable indicators for personnel selection and promotion, and to assess the results of research projects. In particular, this means considering, among the criteria used to rank institutions and for academic career progression, the number of articles published in authoritative journals fulfilling quality requirements, and considered of interest by the scientific community (ones that are cited, in other words). The key assessment method is peer-review, which is the selection of papers by academics and researchers working in the same or a similar sector. The purpose of peer-review is to choose contributions that present the results of research work, are based on a sound methodology, and are attuned to the international disciplinary debate. This is not a generic procedure, but rather a formalized process which must be appropriately managed by a well-organized publishing system which makes

it possible, once the article has been published, to count how many times it is cited, and thus define its “impact”.

This change has had important effects, ranging from the growing use of English as the dominant language to the increasing power of a small number of publishers, to the debatable role of certification agencies providing data and indicators, and of the criteria and methods used. Some disciplines, planning included, are under strain because this change means replacing traditional ways of doing research, assessing results, evaluating articles and publications, and organising career progression procedures. In particular, many of the journals and magazines, as well as books, in which it is usual to publish in countries such as Italy, do not meet the new requirements, and the older generations of scholars run the risk of being considered unfit for their current positions.

The specificities of planning – consisting of inter-disciplinarity and action orientation – are constantly cited and used as arguments to claim that research in this field is mostly coincident with practical experiences and projects (or even professional products) and that publications are of a different nature from those of scientific disciplines. But new trends are consolidating in this field as well.

The procedure followed to evaluate the impact of articles – in terms of the reputation of the journal in which they are published, and of the citations generated – is much debated, in particular as regards the appropriateness of the criteria and indicators used and the role of the agencies and companies that certify journals and provide citations and impact factors data. Thomson Reuters’ *ISI Web of Knowledge/Web of Science*, founded by Emile Garfield (Garfield, 2006) is the most famous of them, but others that are well known are Elsevier’s *SciVerse Scopus*, *Scimago* (using Scopus data) and *Publish or Perish*, based on the *Google Scholar* database, which is more inclusive than the others (Harzing, 2008).

Besides the discussion on the indicators used, there are side-effects to be considered. Old-fashioned paper journals (and many books and local publications), regardless of their intrinsic quality, are excluded by certification mechanisms, and this affects their influence. Moreover, a digital divide is being created by the high subscription rates for electronic journals and citation databases which are not always affordable for institutions and

individuals. Furthermore, a large body of “grey literature”, as well as the growing Open Access literature – which have a major impact at the local level or through diffusion via the Internet – are not considered by formalized assessment indicators.

These developments are taking place within a more general change affecting research and university institutions. At European level, there is increasing homogenization among universities due to the Bologna process and the exchange of students and scholars, while access to EU research funds and growing competition tend to disseminate similar methods and to make institutions in different countries more similar (with drawbacks which will be commented on later in light of Klaus Kunzmann’s warnings). Moreover, results in terms of impact factors and access to international research funds differentiate between research and teaching universities, although in many countries there is no official distinction. This is the case of Italy, where – in principle – all universities are equal, and where some disciplinary groups –planning included – are reluctant to use formalized assessment methods, on the grounds that they are unable accurately to describe the quality of research and the qualification of scholars.

This article, after analysis of the emerging issues relating to the assessment of research products in the light of the recent international literature, conducts a short survey of Italian journals and the debate ongoing in Italy. The aim is not to discuss indicators and ranking methods, let alone propose new ones, but rather to report on the discussion concerning the evaluation of planning research and the qualification of Italian journals, drawing some conclusions with a view to improving current practices.

AN EVOLVING RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

The growing competition in education and research is well represented by the rankings periodically reported by the media and stating which are the best institutions in the world. As usual, together with the use of common criteria, diverse aspects are considered by the specific indicators adopted by rankings such as *Quacquarelli Symonds, Academic Ranking of World Universities* (ARWU – by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University), *Times Higher Education World University Rankings*, *Webometrics* and similar. Most

university rankings are primarily based on research productivity data and therefore they furnish an “oversimplified picture” of university missions, as stressed by a recent survey conducted by the European University Association (Rauhvargers, 2011, p.7) which provides deep insights into the diverse methodologies adopted, together with recommendations on how the results should be used. Some years ago in Italy, the *La Repubblica* newspaper started to publish a ranking compiled by the Censis research institute. This gave rise to a debate and stimulated other inquiries using different indicators (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, *Campus*, *Vision*). Depending on the aspects considered more important, diverse results are produced; some say that depending on the results wanted, different aspects are considered. Assessment has become a routine exercise in the UK (government-sponsored) and the USA (association-based) (Tewdwr-Jones, 2005; Stiftel et al, 2004a; Punter and Campbell, 2009; Stiftel et al. 2009), and institutions which perform well in rankings are quick to display their scores in promotional materials, whereas when results are based on controversial measures, harsh criticisms are made (Stiftel et al., 2004a, p.6; Stiftel et al., 2009, p. 323). Planning schools in any case require specific kinds of assessment, and in the USA recommendations have been made to consider not only research but also “design, outreach and teaching”, thus respecting the specific mission of each university (Stiftel et al., 2009, p. 330). The outcomes are indeed important, because in recent years both academics and potential students have made their decisions also on the basis of ranking data (Stiftel et al., 2004a, p.6).

It is accepted that there is no single way to rank research and educational institutions, because of the intrinsic differences among the activities and products considered, and scores are generally “a synthesis of a multitude of parameters attached to measurable variables” (Geraci and Degli Esposti, 2011, p. 668). Still unresolved, however, is “the problem of which variables should be measured and how” (Geraci and Degli Esposti, 2011, p. 668).

The complexity of the assessment of institutions and research is demonstrated by the literature generated by it – which includes specialized journals (such as *Scientometrics*) – as well as by dedicated research strands (at the University of Pescara, Italy, there is a PhD course in research assessment). Also disciplinary publications devote increasing attention to

assessment, showing the extent to which different sectors are worried by the application of the new methods. These procedures are not new in scientific disciplines, but they are a relative novelty for the humanities and some of the social sciences. Planning is a discipline whose boundaries are loosely defined, and which is influenced on the one hand by urban design and the methods and traditions of architecture – focused on projects – and on the other by a variety of social science methods and process-oriented theories and practices. Moreover, urban planning publications are often oriented to practitioners, and they contain illustrated presentations of projects and plans selected by the editors, not papers submitted by authors and undergoing a peer-review process.

In Italy a sharp distinction is traditionally drawn among hard sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, and the assessment of academic research usually uses this distinction (Abramo et al., 2011). Nevertheless, there is a strong push for the introduction of formalized methods. In particular, new criteria for academic career progression – in planning as well – have been recently issued, and they require the use of indicators (CUN, 2011; ANVUR, 2011a).

Concerning scientific literature, in recent years a major change has taken place in the way that publications are produced, consulted and cited, owing to the diffusion of electronic journals and the availability online of huge amounts of documents and bibliographic data. The access to all the relevant published literature at websites where searches can be made on the basis of key-words has changed both bibliographic research and the nature and organization of journals – especially in the way that papers are written and quoted: “This greater ease of access and use is leading to increased rates of citation to prior work” (Stiftel and Mogg, 2007, p. 73). In fact, the electronic version of a journal is currently the most important one. It activates cross-referral links and supports all the statistics connected to citation and impact factor indexes. Planning journals are also involved in this change, and nearly all of the most prestigious ones are currently on-line (Stiftel and Mogg, 2007, pp. 71-72).

The use of rankings and indicators is facilitated by the growing homogenization among European educational institutions and academic courses. This trend, affirms Klaus Kunzmann (2004) in a paper echoed by a number of subsequent articles, reflects the Anglo-American system and is

undoubtedly positive. But there is the risk that some will win (those who comply with such academic “rules and rituals”), and some will lose: those who “cannot easily adapt to the global model, or who refuse to throw 100 or more years of local academic tradition over board” (Kunzmann, 2004, p.1). The consequences may be severe, changing long-established traditions well rooted in institutional systems (with a key role of the public) in cultural environments and socio-economic milieus. In particular, Kunzmann claims that planning schools will be squeezed into smaller units and shorter courses, thus endangering the teaching specificity based on a balance between theory and practice, and favouring lectures and seminars. It should be added that the strengthening of research assessment procedures (discouraging low-profile activities) will exacerbate such effects.

A key aspect, as said, regards the diffusion of the use of English, which has become the *lingua franca* for the academic world (Kunzmann, 2004). This does not simply concern the use of a neutral communication medium; it also gives more space to the approaches, views and experiences of the English-speaking world. It is a problem that relates, more or less, to all disciplines, but some are more sensitive to it because they are connected to local conditions and mindsets, specific legal frameworks, communication methods and media, etc. Planning is certainly affected by this trend, together with other disciplines, such as human geography (Schuermans et al., 2009; Derudder, 2010). For Kunzmann, the use of English will have consequences on universities (forced to offer courses in that language) and on the literature market, which will be divided into two tiers: the upper one formed by a small number of English language publishers, the second one by regional publishers, with a lower impact (Kunzmann, 2004, p. 6). Planners wanting to be up-to-date and to build a career must refer to papers in English and publish in that language, with obvious consequences on “the relationship to the regional socio-political environment, such as alienation from local milieus, little influence on local development” (Kunzmann, 2004, p. 6). As a consequence, local issues run the risk of being neglected by the academic world and of being left to practitioners, often not so dynamic and less well prepared.

In the case of Geography (Stiftel and Mukhopadhyay, 2007), the contrasting issues regard the cultural as well as the economic hegemony of the Anglo-American countries, on the one hand, and opportunities to facilitate

international discussion on the other. Many considerations can be made on economic and political power, as well as cultural influences, over weaker countries, but also a pragmatic attitude should be encouraged: the use of a common language facilitates communication. Stiftel and Mukhopadhyay (2007, p. 545) have stressed that “English is the global language of scientific communication and English-language publishers have positioned themselves as the arbiters of scientific progress and the profiteers of knowledge distribution”. Indeed, the use of English has created an editorial system centred on Anglo-American institutions and scholars, with a partial coverage of the rest of the world. Currently, most articles are written by English mother-tongue scholars. As far as planning journals are concerned, only a small number of those indexed in the ISI’s Web of Science are not printed in English, and citations of papers written in languages other than English (LOTE) are few.

Among the drawbacks of monolingual communication especially to be stressed is the risk that important points of view and experiences will be excluded because “there is not enough cross-movement of ideas among the planning literatures in different languages” (Stiftel and Mukhopadhyay, 2007, p. 566). The prevalent use of English also produces unexpected effects. Small countries and the developing ones have long been oriented towards using English in academic communication, while other countries with long cultural and scientific traditions have resisted, thus running the risk of lagging behind the newcomers in the global competition.

PLANNING PRACTICE AND PLANNING RESEARCH

Planning is an operational discipline and its main goal is “the development of practical outputs” (Goldstein and Carmin, 2006, p. 68) in order to provide benefits for the communities involved. From this perspective, the discipline is engaged in providing operational methods and tools, and it accompanies political actions. But theoretical, explanatory knowledge is also needed to build effective know-how and to validate the outputs. It has been noted that “planning scholarship has a history of drawing from many disciplines” and this interdisciplinarity has produced a variety of “approaches to problem definition and solution generation but also to notable ontological,

epistemological, and methodological variations in planning scholarship” (Goldstein and Carmin, 2006, p. 68).

The composite nature of planning is a long-debated issue in the disciplinary literature, and only some recent references to the effects in terms of publications are considered here. “While some consider this ‘interdisciplinary’ basis as a weakness - making it difficult for planners to know exactly what belongs to planning - others see it as a key strength” (Davoudi, 2010, p. 33). In fact, planning shares methods and tools with social sciences, on the one hand, and with more technical sectors – in particular urban design – on the other (Goldstein and Carmin, 2006, p. 67). It concerns policies and practices, and its scientific bases are related to sociology, economics, environmental sciences, law and administration, geography and GIS. It is therefore difficult to define the homogeneous areas within which to make comparisons, because a variety of publishing traditions are present, including those coherent with scientific disciplines.

It is not only planning that has two sides: social science and design, but also the progress of urban design can have different bases: “there are two primary locations for innovation in urban design: practice; and university-based research innovations” (Forsyth, 2007a, p. 461). In particular, “In architecture schools, success is based more on success in the design world - competitions, exhibitions - than on peer-reviewed publications and citations” (Anselin et al., 2011, p. 199). In order to counter competition, academics must strengthen their positions, also making use of methods for measuring productivity, in order to improve research effectiveness and to increase funding (Forsyth, 2007a, p. 461).

Planning is also intrinsically locally connected, so that a great deal of low-level literature is produced (mostly of a descriptive kind: experiences, plans, projects) and it is not possible to consider only high-profile products as important. Academic career progression in some countries – and this is the case of Italy – was long based also on professional products. Much has changed in recent decades, also in Italy, differentiating between physical planning and decision-making, between practice and research. This confirms that “[u]rban design is not equivalent to urban research” (Forsyth, 2007a, p. 467) and that research products must undergo assessment procedures.

In the 1960s, planning “became firmly ensconced as a public sector activity

that drew increasingly on formal social-scientific theories and rational decision-making to solve problems” (Forsyth, 2007a, p. 464). This is the basis on which the discipline has developed, requiring specific research and debate on its background, goals and methods, assessing contributions, and accumulating knowledge (Forsyth, 2007a, p. 466, table 1). In short, the multidisciplinary of planning requires more, not less, methodological reflection and entails strict assessment of hypotheses and proposals. It thus pushes towards formalized research methods and an appropriate assessment of contributions (Forsyth, 2007a, 2007b). The result is the progressive consolidation of specific approaches and methods. For academic institutions it is therefore important – and often vital in terms of economic support - the “reflection with practice”, that is the engagement of scholars in applied experiences, which allow to develop a “reflection on practice” (Balducci and Bertolini, 2007; Balducci, 2007).

A survey on the articles published in the *Journal of the American Planners Association* – JAPA – found evidence “that academic planning is developing along the lines of a compact scientific discipline” (Goldstein and Carmin, 2006, p. 74). Another survey of a large number of journals confirmed that the discipline is not “fragmented among different areas of specialization and that there is a common body of journal literature that binds us together as a scholarly community” (Goldstein and Maier, 2010, pp. 69). These conclusions, which cannot be thoroughly extended to the European case, as it will be stressed below on the basis of the analysis of planning journals, concern in particular the specific areas regarding the decision process, while the connections with a number of hard sciences have recently multiplied, thus requiring the use of formal methods, both qualitative and quantitative. Apart from transport, which is traditionally linked with planning, issues such as environment protection, ecosystem defence, climate change effects, as well as sustainable development, require the use of measures and indicators, and the application of techniques like GIS. All these disciplinary fields share the same international standards and publishing traditions. As a consequence, important sectors of planning research are more attuned to scientific paper writing.

However, there are differences in planning trends and practices among countries. In recent years, planners in the USA and the UK “have seen

themselves as applied social scientists” (Stiftel and Mukhopadhyay, 2007, p. 565), after a struggle with urban design and architecture (Anselin et al., 2011), whereas “[d]esign approaches to planning appear to be more common in continental European schools and in schools in developing regions”. These two approaches “have clear differences in the frequency and pattern of publication that results” (Stiftel Mukhopadhyay, 2007, p. 565).

In Italy, the delivery of planning courses mainly at the schools of Architecture and Civil Engineering and a professional practice still dominated by such technical practitioners keep the discipline connected to urban design, while research is oriented to physical planning or the planning process, but mainly from a legal point of view. In recent decades, however, much has changed, in particular because new challenges, apart from the physical organisation of the urban space, have emerged and require the use of a variety of disciplinary methods and tools (sociological inquiries, decision theory, economic programming, environmental protection, etc.), and more scientific approaches have entered the composite field of planning.

CITATION INDEX, IMPACT FACTOR AND THE LIKE

Assessment criteria and indexes are much debated, and even the agencies managing such tools warn against their misuse. The problems regard the focus of the assessment, whether the ranking concerns the journal or the qualifications of its contributors, the number and type of journals covered, and the time extension of data collected. It is clear that one indicator cannot be used to measure different aspects, that only part of the literature is covered, and that not all citations can be considered. As said, there is much discussion on these issues, and a large body of literature has been produced to propose new criteria and indicators.

A caveat has been issued in order to prevent evaluators, in particular for academic career progression, from simply considering the prestige of the journals in which articles are published instead of reading the articles and evaluating them (Goldstein and Maier, 2010, p. 67). Also the European Association of Science Editors has approved a “statement on inappropriate use of impact factors” (EASE statement) which stresses that impact factor scores regard journals, not single articles or scholars.

The problem considered here is whether it is useful or indispensable to rank planning journals, and to consider, in the evaluation of scholars, indicators such as citation index, impact factor, h index, etc. The consideration that in the USA “[a]mong planning educators, there has been a long standing reluctance to the publication of comparative performance measurements” (Stiftel et al., 2004a, p.6) can be extended to most countries.

Research can deal with a variety of issues and involve different end-users. In particular, final products (and in particular publications) may be of interest to academia (and the impact may be restricted to a small community of scholars), to practitioners and civil servants (for whom more practice-oriented articles are obviously of interest), and to politicians. In some countries, as in Italy, English language is not so well known by practitioners and public officers, so that publications in Italian have far more practical results.

The effects of assessment procedures are evident, but they depend on how the evaluation is performed. When the 1992 UK research assessment exercises “placed emphasis on the quantitative aspect of scientific production the response was an increase in publication numbers. However in 1996, when the focus shifted from ‘output counts’ to ‘quality’, there was a greater propensity to publish in journals with a higher impact factor” (Abramo et al., 2011, p. 230).

In general, it is not easy to compare articles in different journals on the basis of indicators because the numbers cannot be taken as they are, and in any case an insight into the publication is required. But it has been observed that there is no strict correlation between the impact factor of a journal and its reputation in the scientific community. Therefore “university administrators should hesitate to evaluate the scholarly output of individual faculty members by the impact factors of the journals in which they publish” (Goldstein and Maier, 2010, p. 73).

Peer-review, as mentioned, is the key means to select papers for publication. It can effectively choose good products, but it can also be a self-referential procedure: the members of a small group of scholars select articles which are attuned to their shared background, address concerted issues, and cite materials produced within that group. Alongside the validation of key topics and methodologies, there is the risk of creating short-circuits among a small number of scholars, thereby reducing creativity and preventing risk-taking

research strands (CGC, 2011, p. 191). It has been observed that impact factors “pursue a circular logic - measuring the impact of academic publication activities on academic publication activities - and reflect a conflict of interest on the side of the publishing industry, which develops indices that centre its own publications in the assessment of academic work”. (CGC, 2011, p. 190). From this perspective, scientific production can be “production of paper by means of paper”, to rephrase Piero Sraffa’s definition of capitalist production.

As regards indexes, a journal’s impact factor represents “a ratio of the number of citations to the number of articles published in that journal”. The higher the ratio, the greater is the journal’s presumed reputation. One consequence is that this value is used to assess scholarly production: “[j]ournal impact factors can then be used as de facto ‘weights’ for each article published by individual faculty members” (Goldstein and Maier, 2010, p. 67), with the connected risk that a paper is rated without specific evaluation of its contents.

The most widely used index is Thomson-Reuters’ ISI Web of Knowledge/Web of Science impact factor, which was first proposed by Eugene Garfield in 1955 (Garfield, 2006). It is calculated, for a given journal and a specific year, as the mean of citations per paper in the two preceding years. “An impact factor of 2.0 means that, on average, papers published one or two years ago have been cited twice in the current year” (Webster, 2006, p. 485).

The journals must satisfy three criteria to be included in ISI Web of Science: “1) works in the journal must be cited regularly in other journals; 2) the journal must provide full bibliographic information in English for each work included and for works cited; and 3) the journal must come out on time...” (Stiftel and Mogg, 2007, p. 81).

Apart from the impact factor, other statistics take account of the immediacy of citations, the average number of references per article (citation density), the life-time of articles (cited half-time), etc. There are also specific indicators regarding the features of an author’s production. Increasingly popular among these indicators is the “h index” proposed in 2005 by J.E. Hirsch. Its value measures the number of articles that have received a number of citations equal to or greater than the same number of articles.

What is counted is the major problem in the compiling of indexes because peer-reviewed articles can be related to citations which include different materials (reviews, comments, etc.), thus over- or under-estimating the real impact (Goldstein and Maier, 2010, pp. 67-68). Moreover, citations must be considered carefully because they are made for a number of different and contrasting reasons (provide background, praise, confutation, etc.) and therefore do not directly furnish an indication of the article's value (Goldstein and Maier, 2010, p. 67).

Other problems regard the number of journals listed in the ISI Web of Knowledge, which does not include either low-quality ones or many of those written in languages other than English, or more recent journals or niche publications. It has been stressed, in particular, that some prestigious planning journals are not ranked (Webster, 2006, p. 485).

Another issue is that “[p]lanning papers tend to cite eclectically”, referring to “reports and plans as well as academic papers”, thus lowering impact factors for more compact disciplines. The result is that “[p]lanning has an average of about ten citations per article” (Webster, 2006, p. 488).

Apart from a few key journals, there is a large spread among the publications consulted by planners, which highlights that a number of specific interests are involved (Goldstein and Maier, 2010, p. 69). In fact, articles in certified journals, professional journals and magazines, and in particular books, are produced and cited by planners. Books can be published without quality control by local publishers, and in some cases they are home-made publications. But everybody knows how challenging it is to write a book, be it a handbook, a textbook, or a collection of essays. Books are indispensable for teaching, and they have a long-lasting educational impact which is not certified by the usual procedures.

Finally, the complexity of territorial disciplines and the variety of publications involved have prompted warnings against the use (and abuse) of the impact factor, because it may recognise the academic fame but not the real “social impact” of research. Two scholars representative of radical geography (*Cynical Geographers Collective*, S.E. Di Mauro and H. Bauder; CGC, 2011) have advanced severe criticisms and proposed a “social impact factor”. They argue that the impact factor “stifles risk-taking scholarship and creative thinking, rewarding a production-line mentality that undermines

academic work quality”. (CGC, 2011, p. 190). The proposed “social impact factor” should track not only publications but also teaching, public outreach, and knowledge production. These considerations are of particular interest to academic planners, who are involved in all these activities and encounter difficulties in making progress in one strand without having experience in the others. For the above-cited authors, the real impact to consider should be the number and the quality of students educated, at the different levels, and the ability to stimulate innovation in planning practices at the local level.

INTERNATIONAL JOURNALS OF PLANNING

A number of assessments have been performed on the reputation of planning journals, and controversial results have emerged (Stiftel and Mukhopadhyay 2007; Goldstein and Maier, 2010; Salet and Boer, 2010, Anselin et al., 2011). The mixed academic/professional nature of planning is reflected in the variety of research interests, as well as in scholars’ perceptions of the relevance of journals (Goldstein and Maier, 2010, p. 73). Papers therefore spread over a number of journals of diverse disciplines, and in order to find titles in ranking databases, one must look through subject categories concerning environmental studies, geography, planning and development, transportation, urban studies, or sociology.

The composite nature of the discipline “makes it difficult to devise meaningful rankings of planning journals” (Webster, 2006, p. 485), and not all high-quality journals are considered by rankings, whose requirements imply costs and management burdens that editors and publishers may be unwilling to assume¹.

1 A search in the ISI database using keywords contained in journal titles yielded the following results:

‘Urban’ - 28 items, among which: *European Urban and Regional Studies; International Journal of Urban and Regional Research; Journal of Urban History; Journal of Urban Planning and Development; Landscape and Urban Planning; Urban Design International; Urban Geography; Urban History; Urban Morphology; Urban Studies.*

‘Planning’ - 29 journals, among which: *Environment and Planning A/B/C/D; European Planning Studies; Journal of Environmental Planning and Management; Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning; Journal of Planning Education and Research; Journal of Planning Literature; Journal of the American Planning Association; Planning Theory; Progress in Planning.*

While scholars of architecture and urban design do not frequently publish in peer-reviewed papers, they produce a variety of “design work, commentaries, edited collections, and research with a humanistic bent”, with the result that “the scholarly production of each group may be invisible to the other” (Forsyth, 2007b, p. 179). Moreover, “teaching is seen as a peripheral issue in the research university”, while “architectural programs spend a great deal of time and energy defending a relatively unique and time-consuming teaching approach...” (Forsyth, 2007b, p. 179).

The questions of where planners publish and how to assess the quality of journals and magazines and the impact of production are still unanswered. More objective measures of scholars’ qualification are certainly needed, in particular by adopting the procedures commonly used in other disciplines, in order to judge the productivity of faculty members and to take decisions on career promotion. But it has been found that “there is no statistically significant relationship between the relative value planning faculty subjectively place on journals and their impact factors” (Goldstein and Maier, 2010, p.71).

An important analysis of international planning journals has been conducted by Stiftel and Mukhopadhyay (2007), whose results are now briefly summarized. Only 4 out of the 25 journals considered were published outside the USA and the UK, specifically in the Netherlands by Elsevier B.V. More than 63% of authors came from the USA, UK or Canada. Italian authors do not rank badly, occupying eighth place, but they accounted for only 1.51% of the articles. Moreover, Italian members of editorial boards accounted only for 1.88% of the total.

In general the rate of internationalization is very low, with few journals having a board of which one-third of members are non-English mother-tongue. There

‘Regional’ - 19 journals, among which: *Annals of Regional Science; Journal of Regional Science; Regional Science and Urban Economics.*

‘Landscape’ - 8 journals, among which: *Landscape Architecture; Landscape Architecture Magazine; Landscape Ecology; Landscape Research.*

‘Assessment’ - 28 journals of different disciplines, among which: *Environmental Impact Assessment Review.*

Some prestigious journals, not yet ranked, are the following: *Planning Theory and Practice; Town Planning Review; DISP; Planning Practice and Research; Journal of Urban Design.*

is also a difference between American journals and the rest, the former being less internationalized than the latter. This has important consequences because there is a correlation between the level of internationalization of an editorial board and that of authorship, with some journals comprising one-third of articles written by non Anglo-American authors.

Another survey on the diffusion and reputation of journals has been conducted among the ACSP schools (*Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning*) (Goldstein and Maier, 2010), and it has highlighted a difference between American and European planners. The survey showed that in the former case planners make use of a high number of journals (191), but the most important ones are considered to be the *Journal of the American Planning Association* and the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. *Urban Studies* follows at a certain distance, while “[t]he large majority of the 191 journals were listed by only 1 respondent” (Goldstein and Maier, 2010, p. 69).

For European planners, a similar inquiry involved AESOP schools (Salet and Boer, 2010; Salet and Boer, n.d.). Scholars cited 235 different journals. While for American planners the first two journals focused on planning, for the European ones “the highest-ranked journals are not typically specialized planning journals” (Salet and Boer, 2010, p. 95), namely *Urban Studies*, *Environment and Planning A* and *European Planning Studies*, which are open to a variety of contributions in diverse fields. “So, contrary to the USA, there appears to be no cohesion in pure planning studies in Europe” (Salet and Boer, 2010, p. 95). The difference between European and American planners’ interests is highlighted by the fact that American journals obtain a second row classification.

Other inquiries have considered the qualifications of planning schools also on the basis of publication data. In particular, the American urban planning schools have been analyzed by considering the qualification of faculties (total number of faculty members, percentage of full professors, ratio of members publishing in ISI journals) and faculty productivity and impact (number of articles in ISI journals and citations) (Stiftel et al., 2004a; for comments: Teitz, 2004; Forsyth, 2004; Myers, 2004; Albrechts, 2004; a reply: Stiftel et al., 2004b). To be stressed among the results is that 45% of faculty members published at least one ISI article in the interval 1998-2002.

Another finding is the concentration of publications in the best-ranking schools: the top 9 schools out of the 84 considered (34 of which offering PhD programmes) account for 38.8% of all publications. Also citations (on the basis of the ISI database) are concentrated: the top 3 schools account for 38.2% of total citations, the top 5 for 50.7%, one half of the schools for 95.7%. Faculty members are even more differentiated in terms of citations, because the top 4 members account for 27.4% of all citations, and the top 19 for 50.5% (Stiftel et al., 2004a, pp. 10-13).

THE PRESTIGE AND IMPACT OF ITALIAN JOURNALS

In Italy, the “urbanism tradition” (CEC, 1997; Espon, 2007) implies that planning consists mostly of urban design and the professional practice of drafting master plans. In general, disciplinary interests regard the legal framework (more precisely, its criticism), urban history, and the analysis of case studies that can be considered good practices or innovative experiences because of their theoretical assumptions or methodological contents. For these reasons, articles in Italian planning journals reflect the tradition of architecture reviews. They are usually descriptive, with few or no bibliographic references to the international literature, while they often take positions in the political debate, with a focus on innovation of the legal framework or on governmental provisions.

The Italian approach to urban planning began to be innovated in the 1960s, in particular by Giovanni Astengo, who founded the first planning school in Italy at the Faculty of Architecture in Venice. The approach viewed planning as an instrument for “rational” public intervention which required competencies in social sciences, economics, and public decisions methods. In the 1970s and 1980s the disciplinary bases of planning were scrutinized (Vettoreto, 2009), creating space on the one hand for more traditionally design-oriented approaches, while on the other pushing for more research work on planning foundations and methods. Regional laws began to structure a precise – albeit bureaucratic – framework. Thereafter, other sectoral planning practices, innovative decision-making processes (public-private partnerships) and assessment procedures (Environmental Impact Assessment, Strategic Impact Assessment), started to be used and required

an expertise different from urban design. More recently, the need to address the new forms of the urbanized space, as well as the emerging environmental issues, the challenge of energy and climate change, the quest for sustainable development, together with emerging social problems and the availability of new technical instruments (GIS, in particular), have opened new research strands, and articles increasingly appear in academic journals. The Italian academic tradition in evaluating publications for academic career progression is rather loose. It used to be based on an outdated law defining “publication” as everything submitted for legal deposit, that is, presentation of the publication (or manuscript) to a court office. This implied that, for career progression, evaluators could consider also products of minor quality, even self-produced ones. Subsequently, ISBN numbers were requested; and recently, more precise criteria have been established by a national academic body (“Consiglio Universitario Nazionale”, CUN, 2010) and the research and university evaluation agency (“Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del sistema Universitario e della Ricerca”, ANVUR, 2011a).

In the 1980s, doctoral programmes were introduced and educated a new generation of scholars (Balducci, 2005, p.250) with sounder methodological bases attuned to the international debate. Recently, the pressure to use formalized assessment methods has become strong. The growing competition among universities and among diverse sectors within the same institutions has required assessment procedures for Departments (the university institutions organising research), disciplinary sectors, and individual scholars (in terms of productivity). In recent years, some legal provisions have established assessment procedures for the universities, and the above-mentioned evaluation agency (ANVUR), after the experience of previous committees, was set up in 2008 (Piazzini, 2010).

The national academic authorities have issued guidelines defining criteria and parameters for the next competitions for academic positions which will be conducted at the national level (CUN, 2011) and a database on productivity has been created by the Ministry for University and Research. Following the directives of the CUN document, the selection of a scholar for a full professorship entails that s/he must have authored at least 10 ISI – or comparable level – articles or books. Also innovative projects or plans critically presented by other authors on authoritative publications can be

considered. An adequate working time span must be covered, and recent productivity must be demonstrated.

Comparison among different disciplines and scholars working in diverse fields has therefore become inevitable. However, the results may be very problematic because scientific sectors which have long introduced international assessment models easily outweigh more traditional ones, in particular in the humanities, but also in architecture and planning.

The discussion on the ANVUR document (ANVUR, 2001a, 2001b), which insists on the consideration of ranked journal papers, has influenced the final guidelines issued by the Ministry for the next academic competitions. A decree (n° 76, June 7th, 2012) has defined such criteria and parameters, which make a distinction between disciplines using ‘bibliometric’ indicators and disciplines using ‘non bibliometric indicators’, the latter including architecture and urban planning. Anyhow, a different weight is given to publications, according to the prestige of the journal or the publisher of the books. And this classification has implied discussion, as well as the criterion that both evaluators and candidates must rank, in terms of publications, above the median of the disciplinary sector.

An overview of Italian journals shows that planning occupies a niche in architecture and urban design publications, and that only a few of the latter are focused on the discipline. In general, they are not organized as disciplinary journals usually are: that is, publishing papers submitted by authors and selected through peer-review procedures. *Urbanistica*, the most prestigious journal, published by the *Istituto Nazionale di Urbanistica*, and which has recently provided a full English translation of articles, is focused on the description of plans and experiences. Other journals, such as *Territorio*, published by the Dipartimento di Architettura e Pianificazione of the Politecnico di Milano (with an international editorial board) and *Archivio di Studi Urbani e Regionali*, to cite two of them (but there are very few others) have a mixed system whereby some papers are selected but not through a formal peer-review process.

The “Conference of the Deans of the Italian Schools of Architecture” has recently drawn up a list of journals and magazines of interest to scholars in the disciplines of architecture and urban planning (personal communication, internet documents). The list ranks the journals in four classes on the basis

of a number of parameters, taking the following into account: English abstract, article in English, editorial board, blind peer-review, peer-review, international diffusion, article selection procedures, ISI certification.

In all, 215 journals and magazines are listed, some of which are in electronic format. There are items from different countries and in diverse languages (English, Italian, German, French, in particular).

<i>Class</i>	<i>No. of journals and magazines</i>	<i>of which: Italian</i>	<i>%</i>
A	44		
B	60	14	23.3
C	78	39	50.0
D	33	28	84.8
Total	215	81	37.7

Table 1 – Journal classification by the Deans of the Italian Schools of Architecture

The upper class counts 44 items, none of them Italian. In the second class there are 60 items, 14 of which are Italian (23.3%). Publications include journals and magazines of architecture (some open to urban design, such as *Casabella*, *Domus*, *Lotus International*), monument restoration, history of architecture, steel constructions, drawing, industrial design, regional sciences, urban sociology. Also *Urbanistica* is included in this class. In the third class there are 78 items, 39 of which are Italian (50.0%). Some important planning journals (*Archivio di Studi Urbani e Regionali*, *Territorio*) and urban design and architecture magazines (*Parametro*), are included here. Last, in the fourth class there are 33 items, 28 of which Italian (84.9%).

It is evident that the Italian editorial landscape is defined mostly by magazines oriented to professionals rather than by academic journals, but it must be stressed that many low-ranking items are in fact good quality publications but lack the features required, such as a prestigious editorial board, a reliable publisher able to cover different markets and to guarantee the continuity of publication, and, most importantly, peer-review procedures and inclusion in certification mechanisms. In fact, most magazines contain descriptive articles not organized in the tradition of academic papers (definition of the problem addressed and the methodology used, overview of

current literature, empirical analysis, discussion and conclusions).

The reasons for drawing up the list of journals regard its use in scholar selection and promotion (in particular providing guidelines for the ranking of Italian publications), but they also concern the endeavour to improve research products. Some journals have started to use peer-review procedures and to provide translations or at least abstracts in English.

Another disciplinary group, comprising planners at the schools of engineering (*Urbing*), has issued some statistics on publications by its associates and proposed an integrative list of journals and magazines (personal communication, web-site materials). In regard to the results, first to be stressed is that articles represent around 24% of the total publications by the scholars involved, the rest being books, proceedings, and local publications. A major outcome is the variety of issues addressed and the number of journals and magazines in which this disciplinary community publishes. Together with ISI journals, there are national but also local publications, which are important in terms of the dissemination of research results but do not provide scientific feedback in terms of citations. It is obvious, however, that a picture of where planners are actually publishing is not enough to consider the publications listed as important for the discipline.

CONCLUSIONS: THE RISK TO BECOME INVISIBLE

Formalized methods to assess the effects of research products are spreading. Their role is crucial because they stimulate competition at higher levels. Yet impact factors and citation data cannot be used as the sole instruments with which to evaluate the importance of a paper or the qualification of a scholar. Not only is the real importance of journals not correlated with impact factors (Goldstein and Maier, 2010), and cross-citation in planning articles is not as frequent as in other disciplines (Webster, 2006, p. 488), but other requirements are needed to qualify a scholar or to appreciate the real effects of his/her activity, apart from those on the academic environment, on what really counts: planning practice.

Some risks of the new methods are well known: “There is an old saying in relation to the promotion process which goes: if you want to promote a lecturer you weigh his/her publications, and if you don’t, you read them” (Punter and

Campbell, 2009, p. 52). Hence there is “no entirely satisfactory substitute for peer review in terms of metrics” (Punter and Campbell, 2009, p. 52). Planning is a niche discipline. Scholars are few and schools are small, even in the USA (Stiftel et al., 2004a, p. 13). As already noted, the discipline has no visibility in ranking databases, and relevant journals must be found under a variety of different headings.

Besides legitimate criticism of assessment criteria and indicators, there is a resistance against the new methods which has clear consequences: “urban planning programs may be losing visibility and resources because they do not participate in comparative performance measurement” (Stiftel et al., 2004a, p.6). It is therefore evident also that planning scholars must adopt, or at least stay tuned with, the research methods of the hard sciences and accept the predominant assessment criteria. This does not mean neglect of the discipline’s usual topics or abandoning its specific methods; rather, it implies accepting the challenge of writing in peer-reviewed journals considering the impact effects. Moreover, given that most qualified journals are in English, this also means accepting to write in that language.

Most European journals – also among those published by large companies – are the initiatives of associations or university departments, and they usually have international editorial boards which allow the integration of different interests and sensitivities. They are therefore open to a variety of topics and appreciate contributions presenting results of applied research. Moreover, some on-line journals are available – among them the *Italian Journal of Planning Practice* – offering additional publishing opportunities. Planners can make use of these tools to give wider visibility to their research work, but they must fulfil the fundamental requirements of methodological rigour and connection with the international debate.

Two aspects must be stressed in relation to the Italian case: the presence of Italian authors and topics in international journals, and the increasing role of research assessment procedures. Not only is a more frequent presence of Italian planners in international journals needed, but also new journals should be promoted in order to fill the gaps in the current literature landscape by better representing Mediterranean issues and experiences. This should be part of “a twin strategy of increasing non-anglophone authorship in English-language journals coupled with improved mechanisms for

sharing of ideas across literatures of different languages” (Stiftel and Mukhopadhyay, 2007, p. 566).

In Italy a first assessment exercise has been conducted on research products (CIVR, 2006). It “produced performance rankings of universities based on an evaluation of a share of their 2001–2003 product that was equal in number to 25% of each university’s research staff complement in each of the 18 disciplines considered” (Abramo et al., 2011, p. 231).

Another assessment is under way on the basis of the quoted guidelines (MIUR, 2011). “The evaluation criteria for the first VTR [triennial assessment of research] clearly directed research institutions to concentrate their resources on top scientists, while the new VQR [assessment of the quality of research] will offer reward on the basis of average performance of their research staff” (Abramo et al., 2011, p. 231).

To date, such assessments have not had much effect in terms of the allocation of public resources, because other parameters (number of students and staff, consolidated budget, etc.) are considered; but competition will be tough in the near future, and the image of institutions and academic staff will be more important in attracting students and obtaining research contracts.

To conclude, planning runs the risk of becoming an invisible academic discipline. In regard to design-oriented sectors, it is necessary to develop reliable assessment methods appropriate to a variety of products, often marked by creativity rather than research (Forsyth, 2007b). For process-oriented sectors, there is much space for improving the quality of research, publishing in international journals, without abandoning contacts with the local planning environment and publications. To be avoided is the risk that scholars involved in publishing in high-ranking journals “do not see a need or do not find the time to write for local journals” (Schuermans et al., 2007, p. 422), thus reducing the impact of research on local society. In fact, “a deeper level of reflection is beneficial, or even necessary, for the [planning] process to be effective” (Balducci and Bertolini, 2007, p. 532). In short, a planner’s CV should not contain only well-ranking articles because s/he must demonstrate an ability to put his/her knowledge into practice and show commitment to the discipline’s social effects. On the other hand, it is no longer acceptable that a scholar be promoted on the basis only of local (or parochial) publications because s/he is a member of a self-protecting circle of academicians.

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