

Academics and Practitioners Bridging the Gap

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Let me start with some short stories: During my recent meeting with our Italian FIG founder member association Consiglio Nazionale de Geometri (CNG), President Piero Panunzi complained about the excessively strong influence of too many academics at FIG conferences, in the work of the commissions and on attitudes in general ...

After a so-called small "geodetic summit" at the Technische Universität München attended by top representatives of state survey and rural development authorities, municipalities, publicly appointed surveyors (BdVI), private consultants and survey companies as well as university professors, there was again a complaint: the universities seemed to be insufficiently focussed and interested in practice, perspectives and the requirements of practitioners ...

It is also said that academics take no real interest in the problems of practitioners. On the other hand some say that practice and practitioners should try to become more involved in urban and rural planning and development, comprehensive land management including disaster and environmental risk management etc. and therefore should try to push these topics on the agenda of academic education. My message is clear and as FIG president I have said this many times too: surveyors and geodesists should not simply be producers, deliverers, managers and modelling experts of geo-data and information. They also should play an active role in the forefront where planning and development decisions and conflict situations arise and are resolved.

It is a fact that criticisms and complaints exist on both sides. There is an ever-increasing gap between the specialising academic world and practitioners. This is perhaps one of the main causes of the decreasing number of survey students in Western and Central Europe. What we do need is more identity and unity. It is questionable if changes in names (from survey or geodesy to (geodesy and) geoinformatics, geoinformation, geomatics et cetera) can really help. But one thing is very clear to me: if we accept the existence of different surveying or geodetic worlds between academics and practitioners, this will lead to an over-specialised, split and fragmented profession and finally to the end of the discipline and of an identifiable study at universities. Some people might say:

"That is life, we cannot resist this development." I am opposed to this opinion. What we really need is the consciousness that both sides need each other, that the "scientific theory of today is the practice of tomorrow" or "nothing is more practicable than a good scientific theory". What we really need is agreement on what kind of graduates universities should produce: pure specialists in niches or "well grounded specialised generalists"? I am deeply concerned that the new bachelor/master study courses in Germany for example will produce more specialised experts rather than specialised generalists. To reach the above mentioned new fields of activities we surely need graduates with a more comprehensive background and with basic talents like personality and some other "soft" skills.

What should be done? We cannot stop some specialisation, but we should stop the erosion of comprehensibility of the study as well as the identity and unity of our profession. If you ask a doctor, an architect or lawyer, irrespective of his specialisation he will answer that he is a doctor, an architect or lawyer. But what is the answer of our students? It is no longer clear!

Faced with these trends the FIG tries to maintain the identity and unity of surveyors. Broadening and adjusting the definition of surveyors' functions is one proof. But so are also the annual conferences which bring together the academic and professional worlds. One of the most impressive and largest events is the DVW's annual INTERGEO which brings together academics, practitioners and exhibitors.

It is expected that the FIG Congress 2006 in Munich will bring together more surveyors, geodesists, GIS people and exhibitors than we have ever seen at such an event. The reason for this is very inspiring and joyful: the FIG Congress will be combined with DVW's INTERGEO 2006 and the annual scientific GEODETIC WEEK. Why inspiring and joyful? Because Munich 2006 will provide a concrete contribution to bridging the gap between academics and practitioners on a global stage. It will be a unique possibility to demonstrate the identity and unity of surveyors and geodesists.