

planning, and short field trips abroad, but also exchanges with planning schools abroad, where students may spend a period of perhaps a semester or more in a foreign country, and participation in cross-national workshops and seminars where groups of students from different countries make presentations on issues of common concern. Most of these activities require some reflection on what has been learned and some students will be sufficiently inspired by this experience to write a dissertation with a comparative dimension. In parallel with students from the UK travelling abroad there has been an increase in students from abroad coming to the UK to study, and some of these may also write a dissertation. This chapter looks at some of the research design issues involved, issues which have been discussed in earlier chapters in this book, but drawing on the decisions and research practice of established comparative workers.

What is cross-national comparative research in planning?

Masser and Williams (1986) distinguish between studies of planning in specific foreign countries and comparative planning research. The essential difference they draw between these two types of study is that comparative planning involves the cross-national comparison of planning activities in two or more countries.

Masser (1986) argues that there is general agreement that there is no distinct field of cross-national comparative planning studies. The subject matter of cross-national comparative planning therefore differs from planning as a whole only in its cross-national dimension. There could be cross-national studies of planning for any subject that a researcher studying planning within their own country might study: housing, retailing, economic development, urban region governance, urban regeneration and so on. What is distinctive is that each country may have a different set of institutions responsible for planning or influencing planning, thus the context for studying planning in different countries is different. Cross national planning research, then, is 'the study of planning problems and practice in different countries in relation to the institutional context' (Masser, 1984, quoted in Masser, 1986: 12). This is consistent with the definition of Bendix (1963: 532) (quoted in de Vaus, 2008) that comparative studies 'represent an attempt to develop concepts and generalizations at a level between what is true of all societies and what is true of one society at one point in time and space'.