

President Statement (2014-16)

Our community, our collective work: Values for Our Future

AESOP is a well-established and flourishing association indeed, and with a wide mission; but what distinguishes AESOP from other planning associations in Europe is that AESOP members are not individuals, but schools; consequently, its very nature is based and rooted on collective work. **Collective work** is a compound of individual wills and actions, but acting cooperatively and according to a sharing of some **values** and **principles**.

Some values and principles

I discovered and then considered AESOP not just an international vibrant context, or a place of potential research or teaching opportunities (although AESOP is both), but also, and especially, a **friendly** and **cooperative context** inspired by the idea of collective work.

If we look **outside AESOP**, in these hard and troubling times, **it is not so**. In times of crises, and in Europe particularly, there are many challenges and threats: in public life, in society, in our cities as well as in our schools and departments. Cooperation and collective work are often not the priority, and we are all (sometimes reasonably or even unwillingly) 'tempted' to build fences, to compete in a solipsistic way, to look just at our 'home-work', being stressed by internal duties, commitments and bounds. I believe that the challenge of the next years is to maintain and even improve the mission and the very nature of AESOP, which is embedded in **cooperation** and **solidarity**, together with **intellectual freedom**, **passion**, **ethics**, in a dynamic and friendly environment.

In times of crises, there is the risk of becoming 'selfish', of increasing competition (eg. in order to 'attract' more students or resources), of cooperating less. In my view, AESOP is the 'fresh air environment' and a way to escape from that risk, while recognising the financial obstacles for some members to benefit from it, attending its congresses and meetings. In times of crises, usually we regret the past, we are obsessed by the present and scared of the future. It is reasonable and natural; but a winning strategy has always been to learn from the past as a rich experience, to face the present as a temporary and challenging condition, and to look forward and imagine the future, as difficult and uncertain as it can appear. This is an approach that, as planners, we should expect of ourselves and our organisation. So, let's talk about **the future of AESOP**, and let's 'imagine' it, learning from its richness of experiences in the past and its surprisingly (if compared to the general situation) vitality at the present.

Imagining the Future

1. **The future of AESOP: new generations of academics.**

I do not want to indulge in rhetoric, but it is really the future of AESOP: it is just a matter of fact. Lots of initiatives and actions have been undertaken in this direction, as the PhD Workshop or the establishment of the **Young Academic Network** and its involvement in many AESOP initiatives and governance. In times of crises, besides general working difficulties for young researchers in every department or school, there is also the risk that YA could appear as a 'loose' or 'minor' association. We need of cooperation and solidarity amongst generations: most **innovation comes from the future.**

2. **The future of our schools: diversity and plurality.**

We are stressed by, and sometimes scared of, validation procedures, as they are all based on (implicit and sometimes explicit) competition and considered as the main criterion for assigning (paucity of) resources. Coordination of planning curricula, quality assurance and accreditation processes have been and still are on AESOP's agenda, but there is the need for further work and stimulus, on the principle of **cooperation** and **mutual benefits**. Despite the shrinking of curricula and students, the 'diversity' of planning programmes (and practices) is increasing: this has to be considered a richness, and not a threat or weakness.

Coordination and quality recognition have to be considered in a **cooperative approach**, rather than in a competitive one: this approach has to be based more on **diversity** and **plurality** rather than uniformity. Innovation in teaching means also **critical thinking**, despite some general trends to uniformity, managerial performances and standards. Although AESOP does not accredit schools, AESOP could build up a framework for quality recognition – based on the above mentioned core values – which members would benefit from in their own processes of accreditation.

3. **The future of our research: achieving good standards, together.**

In recent times, and especially in a time of crisis, there is a great pressure for some members, schools and colleagues to cut back on quality and quantity of research. AESOP was, and is, important in challenging this and promoting **excellence in research**. I will not give an exhaustive list, but the 'evolution' of AESOP Congresses and the invention and flourishing of the Thematic Groups are just two great examples of the gradual and supportive approach to promoting research excellence, not to talk of the Awards (Best Published Paper and Best Conference Paper). I believe that the **open** and **cooperative** approach was and still has to be the winning strategy, and a major involvement of YA can be very helpful. It is not just a matter of innovation, but also of **critical thinking**, and for its nature, structure and forms, AESOP is the best place for it. The role of young generation is essential in this.

4. The future of our discipline: professional recognition, a hard task today.

Planners are not valued, or even professionally recognized in many European countries. Instead of shrinking, this process is spreading even in countries that, in a recent past, have been considered 'lucky' and 'progressive' in this respect. Especially in times of crises, planning (and its public role) is not at the top of agendas, at the EU level as well as in most of national contexts; there is also a lack of recognition of planners' role and competencies. It is a very hard task to oppose this trend, and it has been widely debated and fully undertaken in the recent past of AESOP. **This is not just a professional matter.** This affects also policies about **planning schools** and **planning research**. Cooperative work (inside AESOP but also in cooperation with other associations,) is the way at least to have some chances of success. It is also the time to think about further networking and collaboration initiatives with AESOP cooperation partners on the young professional level.

5. The future of our European identity: an inclusive approach.

If we look at the 'Map' of AESOP (number of members and countries), in 25 years it has become much wider and diverse, not to talk of PhD students from outside Europe attending our PhD programmes: in short, more and more schools and countries, which reflect **an idea of Europe** which is neither geographical nor political or institutional, but which is sustained by an **inclusive approach** and an **open attitude**. At the societal and political level, the notion of Europe (and its union, not to talk of its policies) is challenged, put under debate and even fiercely criticized. Despite that, and even in opposition to that, we have to maintain and enhance our inclusive, cooperative and supportive approach, as **AESOP geography** has ever been a **'state of the mind'** and a **cultural matter** before and rather than a geo-political one. We should also create the conditions in order to have the non-European PhD students and researchers of the present as a resource for greater global networking in the future.

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