

Challenges, opportunities and legacies: experiencing the internationalising of UK planning curricula

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About the research

This briefing note summarises research conducted by the University of Birmingham and the University of the Free State (South Africa) within the ESRC/NRF SAPER project (2017-2020). One of its objectives was identifying the context-specific realities of planners in South Africa and the wider Global South and as such inform the need to enhance the quality of international planning education, in the UK. Results are drawn out of thirteen interviews with academics in both “Russell Group” universities (7), former university colleges (3), and “new” universities (3). Participants were deliberately selected with a range of teaching experience across undergraduate and postgraduate planning programmes. Results are also extracted out of an online survey conducted to capture the views of current practicing UK planners. The RTPI distributed the survey in its February 2018 “Members’ Bulletin”. Survey respondents (72) were asked to provide fulsome responses to open-ended questions about their time working in planning, their thoughts regarding the value of international planning education, whether they have worked in international contexts, and their perspective on the kind of experience needed to work in different international contexts.

Who should read this?

Planning educators, policy-makers and practitioners in planning in the UK and internationally, and especially researchers with an interest in international planning education and practice.

Key messages for policy and practice

Rapid urban growth in parts of the global South has led to a growing recognition of the need for increased numbers of trained planners to regulate unregulated development, safeguard the health and quality of life of urban populations and protect natural resources. At the same time planners in the global North are also being encouraged to recognise the significance of interactions, flows of people, goods, concepts and differing approaches to planning in an increasingly globalised world. Furthermore, increases in global student mobility, the expansion of branch campuses and exchange programmes, together with the transfer of ideas via vibrant international professional networks represent signs of successful official efforts to internationalise curricula.

Yet doubts remain surrounding whether internationalisation is being sufficiently embedded within planning curricula. There are repeated concerns regarding whether future practitioners are being equipped with the knowledge and skills to address the complex twenty-first century global challenges of creating high-quality, socially-inclusive and sustainable places. This research therefore provides strong evidence from UK planning educators and practitioners on the implications of internationalising UK planning curricula. It focused on the opportunities and challenges encountered by planning educators and practitioners as they experience internationalisation.

Main findings

Experiencing internationalisation

Respondents were generally positive about the recent efforts to explore the global nature of planning. Indeed, for some, embracing new knowledge and skills would likely enrich curricula, attract diverse student cohorts, while encouraging students to reflect more deeply on the value that broader international perspectives might bring. This was seen by some participants as being particularly important in tackling the impacts of climate change, urban growth and other global challenges.

But there are tensions. For example, certain interviewees argued that a push towards international student recruitment has rather skewed the educational priorities of some planning programmes, leading to fears around disciplinary fragmentation and the impact caused by internationalising the curricula. Hence there is evidence of the tensions involved with universities seeking to differentiate themselves in a competitive, global marketplace, while delivering high-quality, geographically focused and professionally accredited education. In addition, not all programmes look to internationalise, and both internal and external forces mean that wholesale, radical change in curricula is difficult, unnecessary or unwarranted.

There is evidence pointing to the need to harness the rich mix of identities, abilities, learning styles, language levels, language requirements, cultural backgrounds, expectations, motivations and prior experiences, that emerge with increasingly diverse, international cohorts. Again, though, finding ways to accommodate and celebrate such diversity remains challenging, without institutional support and the sharing of knowledge.

International case studies, well-designed UK-based or international field visits, and exchange opportunities were reported as having a positive effect on raising students' awareness of international planning ideas and debates. That said, while home-based or overseas field-based approaches are often attractive to both UK and non-UK students, they also have financial, environmental, time and resource implications. Nevertheless, it was reported that placing students in safe but unfamiliar surroundings, replete with different cultural customs, sights, smells and sounds, encourages a certain willingness to live (albeit temporarily) and work in potentially challenging contexts. In turn, this may strengthen students' ability to learn, act and plan.

International examples

Both the survey respondents and interviewees talked of the need for relevant, diverse knowledge bases that reflect much-discussed social science ideas around the interconnectedness of place. Here participants acknowledged the value of looking to other knowledge bases from beyond the Anglophone setting.

Being alert to how (spatial) planning transfers and adapts in different societies could form part of a more "universalist" planning education attuned to global challenges. But there are other benefits here. For example, such an approach also provides an important set of skills needed for students to access the global labour market. Hence there is evidence to suggest that further curricula design could incorporate a wider set of international perspectives. Yet while planning education is being shaped and informed by a different insights around the different role of urban planning under conditions of



globalisation, respondents were alive to the issues of expanding educational underpinnings in ways that might jar with official UK-centred accreditation processes, quality assurances and the needs of UK employers. Even so, some experienced planning practitioners pointed to how planning education should also encourage and bolster a sense of acquisitiveness; a willingness to listen and learn from other contexts. But seeing and interpreting the world as being increasingly interconnected should not be a substitute for downplaying the functioning of economies, culture, or the other internal and external forces that impinge on indigenous contemporary planning processes. Instead, and rather than seeing internationalisation as being a set of “rootless” ideas, respondents suggested international perspectives offer a “way in” for students to explore the traditions and values of particular geographical contexts. Hence certain participants cautioned against jettisoning established ideas about the historical processes and actors involved with the planning and management of places.

The RTPI encourages accredited planning programmes to assess the experience of spatial planning in different contexts and spatial scales. While this was acknowledged by respondents, there was also a sense among certain interviewees that paying regard to the legacy of historical and *earlier* spatial imaginaries might help planners develop a more rounded sense of how places are shaped by global connections, both past and present. For example, further opportunities lie ahead that explore the imprint left by Western planning concepts, which were designed to be woven into networks of rational control, and that sometimes overlooked or suppressed existing indigenous knowledges, affiliations and ways of life. For some interviewees, therefore, recognising the layered legacy of colonial incursions and the enduring influences of exported Western planning models, remains an important task for educators, students and future planners.

Acknowledging that legacies of global connection have created diverse urban centres may help broaden current interpretations of change, which stress importance of corporate finance, compliant planners and avaricious developers in shaping urban environments. Well-documented fears surrounding a shortage of trained UK planners, combined with ongoing concerns around public sector cutbacks, might place a practical break on such ambitions. Even so, evidence suggests that there is further scope to consider how customs, cultures and forms of exchange that take place in certain diasporic communities are shaped in some way by colonial forces. Developing a more rounded understanding of urban change, as shaped by colonial incursions, both past and present, presents an opportunity for planners to consider the needs and opportunities of diverse urban communities in the global North.

Wider implications

Increasing the supply of globally attuned trained planners to deliver sustainable places in different parts of the world remains a pressing concern. Hence there is a need to create planning curricula that are suitably positioned to provide future practitioners with the skills, knowledge and experience to deal effectively with twenty-first century challenges. This research provides fresh insight into how UK educators and practitioners encounter efforts to internationalise planning education. There are several areas of strength. Evidence demonstrates the benefits of promoting international partnerships and strengthening research collaboration, and where curriculum design helping to increase students’ preparedness for planning challenges that stretch out across different geographical contexts.





Appropriateness, usefulness and impact of the contemporary
Higher Education urban planning curriculum in South Africa

Institutions, departments and courses also face a varied set of internal and external pressures which limit and affect efforts to internationalise. Staff and student recruitment, curriculum design, course delivery, teaching and research agendas vary according to different institutions. But the findings from this research suggest that there remains a wider, underexplored tensions around the balance between providing locally focused, professionally accredited education, and efforts to broaden planning programmes that appeal to lucrative overseas markets.

Several practical suggestions emerged from this study. First, efforts to internationalise need to be managed, resourced and sustained in ways that benefit staff and students. This requires university, practitioner and institutional support in ways that would enhance provide future planning practitioners with necessary skills to deliver future (global) planning solutions. Second, other opportunities surround how institutions might be encouraged to align international marketing, student recruitment and support services with staff recruitment, expertise, teaching and research agendas. This may also involve building staff expertise, motivations and willingness to embrace opportunities associated with internationalisation. A forum for sharing knowledge and good practice on this would be a welcome step. Third, acknowledging the varied ways in which staff and students of different backgrounds, encounter efforts to embed internationalisation across formal and informal higher education time-spaces. Again, a forum that shares and captures critical reflections on the personal motivations and experiences of staff and (former) students, would help with building inter-institutional dialogue and shared knowledge bases.

Finally, there were some powerful examples of where UK planning programmes are encouraging different international ideas that push planners to reconsider established Western knowledge bases and teaching practices. There is scope for the dissemination of these comparative perspectives and case studies which might expose greater numbers of students to important global dimensions of planning. Comparative international case studies would also need to consider the contextual factors shaping planning practice. But there is scope to expand the range of case studies and teaching resources that consider the challenges and opportunities of planning at a time when the world of places, such as nations, cities and regions, are being shaped by dynamics of an increasingly networked global society.

While context matters, postcolonial ideas and other international examples may offer fresh impetus to professional bodies, institutions, planning educators and students to reflect on the diverse histories and geographies of globalisation. For example, further consideration could be given to whether different kinds of “tactical urbanism” found in parts of the global South are transferable to other contexts. But there are other opportunities, too. Postcolonial perspectives would encourage students to reflect on the importance of collective memories, traditions, customs and sense of place attachment that manifest in many diasporic communities in parts of the global North. Understanding these forces is an important starting point for helping planners to build stronger, inclusive and sustainable places.

More information on the SAPER project can also be obtained from <http://saperproject.weebly.com>

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