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# Encounters with the unfamiliar: international planning education

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## ABSTRACT

Planning practice and education require consideration of both universal and local norms and methods. It is often firmly embedded in localized issues and practices, yet students need to expand their career horizons and develop more critical, reflective understandings of planning issues in their 'home' environment. Internationalized curriculum provides a fertile environment for exploring cross-cultural encounter and reflexive practice using varied planning traditions to situate examples for teaching. The ethical and political implications of working internationally can, however, be masked within the seeming familiarity of shared planning language, concepts and techniques, and the apparent simplicity of comparative frames of reference. Planning is inherently political and contextual, yet the explicit dilemmas of the political and economic setting can, at first, appear hidden during a field project where the apparently universal notions of effective spatial planning are central to the dialogue amongst a diverse student group. Using the example of four joint field/project visits (2010–2014) involving Australian and Sri Lankan planning students in tsunami- and conflict-affected areas of Sri Lanka, this paper draws on student reflections and observations to explore the explicit encounters with ethical dilemmas, political settings, contingent problem-setting and the implications of these for planning practice within the home setting.

## KEYWORDS

Planning education; internationalization; cross-cultural planning

## Introduction

Bauman (1990, 15) contends, 'familiarity is the staunchest enemy of inquisitiveness and criticism'. Yet, for students, using and steering through discomfort and confusion into the unfamiliar requires not just an encounter with an unsettling 'other', but to learn from this encounter, despite its challenges. This suggests an opportunity when challenges to normative (and localized) assumptions of practice and of problem formation are crucial for spatial planning students adapting to global urban and regional challenges.

However, planning's inherent tendency towards universalism in problem-setting and modes of practice are often expressed through transnational and globalized models of 'good' urbanism and urban governance. These often occlude what are acute differences in cultures of place and of practice; contrasting the norms of planning and those of daily life, especially to students only beginning their engagement with planning as (often less than ideal) practice. Likewise, the received and shared logics of *doing* planning often mask the real value of cross-cultural encounters. Planning's locally derived discourses, problems and solutions can, at first glance, look and feel familiar to students and to practitioners from elsewhere, despite vastly different cultural and economic settings. Conversely, as observed by Dühr, Cowell, and Markus (2016), national institutions and legal frameworks are

pervasive elements of planning education and training, acting as barriers to utilising effective lessons from elsewhere.

For planning educators, internationalizing the curriculum provides a pathway into comparative learning opportunities as well as offering attractive study options for students seeking careers in a globalizing profession. Comparative diversity can be provided through various educational situations, yet while these objectives can often be interwoven through the classroom setting, international field studies provide an effective model, exploring the practices of planning in 'other' situations, and also providing examples for reflection about norms of practice and diversity of community in the 'home' setting. Activities including student exchanges, overseas (travelling) studio projects and study tours provide instances of this approach within tertiary study.

The planning student experience of such activities is often strongly personalized, but typically includes an expanded awareness of the scope of professional planning practice and the development of a *critical reflexivity* in relation to what were previously assumed norms of urbanism and planning practice at home. More generally, international experience offers challenges and potential for students seeking skills for planning in diverse communities and multi-cultural (or multi-national) settings (Bull 2004; Abramson 2005; Yigitcanlar et al. 2009; Dühr, Cowell, and Markus 2016). We contend that it is these challenges that can provide the basis for a confronting reassessment of assumptions about norms and practices, and open a path for considering ethical challenges of *knowing* and *acting* that has resonance for students in unfamiliar, but also familiar settings. Students are required to question their knowledge and its application in ways that test their newly developing professional self, and the logics and parameters of being a planner.

This paper focuses on the way in which Australian planning students consider ethical and political concerns in relation to project activities and personal encounters in a developing nation, and the way in which a series of international project exercises offer reflection on locally contingent planning practices in various settings. It also considers the ways in which reflective and responsive practice is made possible by such encounters, and through considerations of the familiarity of the received modes of planning practice, but the challenging unfamiliarity of the context of their application. The paper will report on student feedback and supervisors' observations over four annual international field studio projects from an Australian university to Sri Lanka undertaken alongside local planning students at a Sri Lankan university. These studio projects followed pre-tour briefings and online contact between student cohorts, and composed of a series of stakeholder meetings, data collection and preparation of local and regional spatial plans, through partnerships with national and local planning agencies. The findings also describe reflections of Sri Lankan students involved in the various projects. The paper considers how specific planning values and knowledge may initially appear universal to the discipline and reflects on those that are contingent upon the cultural, economic and political setting, and in particular the ways that students engage with this contrast and its consequences for their scholarship and professionalism in planning.

## Planning and internationalism

Planning as an international field of practice, with consequent modes of policy transfer, and at times imposition, is long standing. Traditions of highly programmatic and ostensibly universal planning systems emerged in the twentieth century in education and practice, and lingered as ideal models of policy transfer even as the logics of the *modernization* project of planning subsided. This can best be recognized through examples such as mass housing projects, mass motorway construction and the like, many of which persisted '... well past the point where its failure seemed obvious, even to casual observers' (Harper and Stein 2006, 26).

While contemporary planning practice is ostensibly more reflexive and pluralistic in its intent – recognizing the highly contextualized settings for negotiated and collaborative processes – institutional traditions, developmentalist tendencies and the transnational process of politics and information gathering each operate in a complex network of transfer. Such flows are neither unitary nor

one-way, but they are important to planning systems and to professional self-identity. Attempts to establish 'substantively multipolar, comparative and cosmopolitan modes of urban theory-making' (Peck 2015, 160) in urban studies reveal the complexity for seeking a generalized notion of urbanism or urban governance as exceptionalism or genuine differences are apparent in the experiences of cities and city life.

Recognising planning as both a universal and local project has long been critical to understanding the processes and limitations of policy transfer (Burke 1967; Ward 2000; 2010; Healey 2012). In this regard, the developmental phases of the post-colonial era are perhaps the most acute examples of where context, cultures and priorities collide with an international (usually developed world) agenda for planning, spread through pathways and networks that are themselves in flux. While the need for differentiated and local approaches to planning practice has become increasingly acknowledged (Sanyal 2010), this has not necessarily reduced the individual (ethical) dilemma of identifying what useful and universal professional knowledge suits international transfer and what is culturally contingent, or (best) suited to local needs. This raises the difficulties in considering the 'effects of de-contextualization and objectification of the experiences and localities produced – more or less intentionally – by transfer processes' (Lieto 2015, 118), especially the a priori recognition of such effects. Recognizing and unravelling this difference is significant for international and local practice and for planning education. In this specific case, it requires a pathway to comparative analysis that '... resists categorizing the "Asian City" as an exotic "other", elevating it onto a mythical pedestal, yet appreciates its differences [and] localisms' (Ren and Luger 2015, 145), but rather considers it a potentially useful model for understanding contemporary urbanism.

Healey (2012) identifies that the decline of the unitary modernization myth of planning has required reconsideration of the transfer of the knowledge, practices and techniques that remains or have emerged. She raises questions of both direction and necessity in policy transfer. Yet de-contextualized examples of appropriation and of application remain prominent in contemporary planning practice – ideas are seen, taken-up and reproduced in both education and practice. Healey contends that while ideas and assumed 'good' practices still flow, they continue to risk a new hegemony at the expense of locally developed invention – a flattening of local difference.

Yet explicitly rejecting such transfer potentially results in extreme localism and failure to learn from example – hence the need for universality of some ideas, with others being contingent on context. Planning as it is done remains an essentially normative exercise, concerned with how things *ought* to be. Models of this are often best sought, represented and argued through comparative example from elsewhere. Healey concludes that a 'dynamic contingency' or reflexive consideration of universal planning ideas is fundamental to this process – however, this creates new challenges for internationalized education and for the students and professionals negotiating this dynamism. Hard choices are required about the suitability and context of transfer. The crucial questions appear to relate to the capacity of planners, and of student planners, to make judgments regarding an appropriate stance or action (or planning practice) and its suitability or cognisance of the setting, while also recognizing that elements of 'good' planning practice should pervade, including those relating to an ethical stance such as equity and justice, as well as aspects more technical in nature. Teaching such reflexive action is difficult, and international field settings offer an opportunity in this regard.

The internationalization of planning practice and planning education is problematic as it inevitably raises question of the utility of comparison and the embedded nature of local knowledge. Yet these experiences potentially serve three important purposes; by requiring reflection on values, developing cultural literacy and developing a sense of participation in a 'globalized' profession. Ultimately, an internationalized curriculum expands and deepens students' knowledge, skills and experience. Each is valuable for students' personal and professional development and relevant to any setting. It requires student planners to consider and separate *aconscious* knowledge and practice from contextually contingent aims and values. When possible, international immersion and consequent reflection most readily offers this opportunity.

### ***Internationalized planning curricula***

Forms of ‘internationalization’ in teaching and learning vary from a deliberate attention to ‘global’ issues of population and urbanization through to the encounter provided by international student cohorts, as well as opportunities to study abroad as a studio/project or student exchange. In Australia, international engagement opportunities exist most strongly in relation to the attraction of international (fee paying) students, but also through the recognition of the relevance of international research linkages, student exchanges and student mobility. Harman (2005) describes the emergence of an internationalization *imperative* within Australian higher education, and while dominated (perhaps fleetingly) by an international education ‘market’, the benefits of encounter and outward movement are actively promoted, with an emphasis on Asia. This is in line with the global formation of corporatized models of higher education, linked to its *economization* and the increasing mobility of labour (graduate) markets (Spring 2015). The counter-flows from developed to less-developed regions are typically in the form of exchange, field studies and comparative research. As in other nations, Australian Government support for international engagement, specifically with the Asia-Pacific region, has increased considerably in recent years, with a number of relatively generous programme subsidies available to universities and students as a broader project of exercising ‘soft power’ in the region (Byrne 2016).

Internationalized planning curricula have also been identified as a product of an expressed need and awareness from staff and students. Ali and Doan (2006), for example, identified emergent strategies for internationalization in their survey of planning curricula in the United States. Goldstein et al. (2006) suggest a globalization in the planning academy, and describe a multi-national collaborative project where, despite some limits to ‘direct relevance’ of the experience, the development of culturally aware professionals was enhanced. Dandekar (2009) offers support for international encounter and collaboration in smaller planning schools due to more limited opportunities for encounter. Similarly, Absalom and Vadura (2006, 332) recognize that ‘simply adding international content is not enough’ and that students consider *interaction* to be a critical part of their education. Clifford (2009) identifies that less ‘pure’ disciplines are able to contextualize these experiences well – a seeming advantage for planning education with its experiential and practical imperative. Klopp et al. (2014) specifically call for internationalized teaching projects that build capacity in both the local and visiting student bodies, as critical engagement and reciprocal learning, a strong objective of the student projects discussed in this paper.

For planning, experiential modes of teaching and learning are often common and have a long history through fieldwork and project activity. Project-based approaches allow exploration of a range of themes and issues through the context of a project or encounter. Evidently, context matters as any project space is entangled within the socio-political and environmental situation. This context is central to the project task, rather than a decontextualized example in the classroom. While potentially powerful, this relies upon deep contextual understanding, and significant preparation and pre-briefing for students. The ethics, cultures and politics of doing planning are prominent in informing and teaching method and practice. In an international setting, this is amplified through cross-cultural understanding, or lack thereof, and familiarity with the agenda for planning practice and priorities.

Consequently, ethical dilemmas exist not only in knowing and in learning from habits in practice grounded in internationalized and culturally contingent settings, but also in reflecting on those lessons suitable for transference. These issues work in both directions. We have encountered a range of potentially ‘contingent’ issues that have often confronted and confounded our Australian planning students in Sri Lanka. At times these issues have confronted and confounded students, requiring navigation and negotiation of ethical questions of the application of lessons and knowledge from elsewhere and the applicability of ‘universal’ planning ideals, all while operating in the familiar context of (nearly) familiar planning language, historical conventions and administrative structures.

## The dynamics of Sri Lankan planning: from post-colonial lessons to globalization

The modern Sri Lankan planning system has been largely associated with British planning tradition. This is evident in early planning practices and regulations that were introduced by the British colonial administration, with some still in existence (centrally the *Town and Country Planning Ordinance* 1946). The consequent plan-making procedure and the production of local and regional plans tended to be centralized top-down, comprehensive, master plans. These typically had a 'blueprint mentality' with less emphasis on on-ground action and the mediation of local spatial practices, and this legacy continues in many recent and contemporary plans (Steinberg 1984; van Horen 2002; van Horen et al. 2004).

Nevertheless, from the 1990s the Sri Lankan planning system attempted to adopt a more flexible and responsive planning approach. This resulted in outcomes such as structure planning and strategic planning with more emphasis on consultative approaches, particularly those plans addressing urban sprawl and urban housing issues (e.g. the *Colombo Metropolitan Regional Structure Plan* 1998).

Sri Lanka's long civil war ended in 2009 and post-war planning priorities emphasize regional development, infrastructure developments, creation of new regional city-regions and city beautification and renewal. Accordingly, massive public investment has been allocated to construct projects such as a regional airport (Mattala), harbour development, new (motor) expressways, regional road improvements, power plants and open space planning projects (National Physical Planning Department 2010).

A notable example has been the project to transform Hambantota, a small port, into a metropolitan city in the Southern Province in Sri Lanka. This project included a new urban centre development, major public buildings, an international airport, convention centres, a harbour and an international sports stadium. It received significant public investment from the previous Sri Lankan President and attracted much needed investment from the Chinese government, including the use of Chinese engineers, designers and construction workers (Department of National Planning 2010).

Most recently, the newly elected government in Sri Lanka has introduced the *Western Megapolis Plan*. This plan aims to transform urban agglomerations in the Western region (including Colombo) and transform the national economy through industrialization and technological innovation ('smart cities'). Further, it aims to address the issues pertaining to traffic congestion, urban services, amenities and the environment (Ministry of Megapolis and Western Region Development 2016). Significantly, the new Western Megapolis Plan differs from previous plans in Sri Lanka as it attempts to integrate social, economic and political goals with spatial policies and a distinctly *globalizing* agenda.

### Is Sri Lankan planning unfamiliar or familiar to Australian planning students?

As Healey (2012) describes, the universal knowledge and practice of planning is contrasted with elements that are contextualized in place. For students in both places, apparently 'universal' ciphers of planning exist in the form of a common British legislative tradition, the similar texts and language of planning and the shifting modes of normative planning practice whether past comprehensive master-planning or a present developmentalist agenda. However, for Australian planners, the 'contingent' or 'unfamiliar' roles of Sri Lankan planning and its practice relate to issues such as (i) the visible exercise of power and political patronage along with the collisions of traditional and introduced models of administration and (ii) the lack of resources to realize development outcomes coupled with the informality of urbanization and development within the urban environment.

### **Politics, centrality and economic resources**

Like many other developing nations, Sri Lanka has a highly centralized political and administrative structure and planning operates within this framework. Planning and politics are visibly linked

through a centralized political and development agenda. Similarly, to many developing nations, planning in Sri Lanka is a project of a state-directed future (Rakodi 2001) and, while planners are equipped to operate in a neutral way, Sri Lankan provincial council and local authorities have organized along sectoral lines with relationships to central power.

Of course, planning is a political and value-laden process in Australia, and as elsewhere 'the boundary between the technical and the political regularly moves' (Murdoch and Abram 2002, 11) despite preferences for expert techniques. Planners in Australia, as elsewhere, often imagine themselves in the mode of Bauman's (1987) 'legislators' or as rationalists, rather than as actors within the active policy-networks described by Hajer (2009). What is different in Sri Lanka is the visible exercise of patronage politics without consequent enframing narratives of planning rationality, coupled with resource constraint and centralization. This results in a disjuncture between plans and on-ground outcomes.

### **Formal and informal development and planning practice**

The formal and informal distinction in planning is a fundamental feature in contemporary urbanism in cities and that plays a fundamental role in urban imagination and practice especially in global South. This is perhaps the most different and unfamiliar feature of planning and urbanism for students from developed economies. Understanding seeming informality as a part of the process of planning networks, alongside the administrative cultures this implies, is difficult for students from the global north. Likewise, the physical informality of place, with its initial surface appearance of visual disorder, despite the legible signs and codes apparent to insiders, is taken as a physical manifestation of the informal city by visiting students.

The formal–informal distinction is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Traditionally, informality was understood as one of the key problems facing cities, offending the foundational legalities of urban development, rooted in property rights and regulated settlement (UN-Habitat 2009). Informal practices were seen to belong to the global south while the *formal* was practiced in the global north (AlSayyad 2004; Duminy 2011; Jones 2016). Alternative perspectives suggest that both processes coexist in each part of the world (Roy 2009). Behind the seeming rigidities of official procedures in first world cities, there are uncertified negotiative networks of hidden influence and deal-making 'subterranean' politics take place (Gaffikin and Perry 2012). Generally, informal agreements and forms of valuation and negotiation drive urban development and urban life in the north as much as they do in the global south (McFarlane 2012).

Consequently, many scholars emphasize neither pure informality nor formality, but rather a spectrum (Innes, Connick, and Booher 2007). In Sri Lanka, slum settlements, illegal constructions and development deregulation have been identified as informal practices (REEL 1999; Wickramasekera 2012). Further, patronage politics in planning for those with political contacts or directly through bribery are considered as features of informal practice in Sri Lanka. Yet, informality can also be identified in a more organized and functioning form through the negotiation and institutional devices that allow service provision and resource allocation. As elsewhere, decisions are made within networks of policy, power and practice. Yet for many students these negotiative networks are largely occluded at 'home' and highly visible amongst the visible informality of the Sri Lankan urban environment.

In Sri Lanka, outsiders may consider the visual form and flows of urban settlements as chaotic but there is a functioning order to be seen, eventually. Such conditions, however, are not clear on the surface to the visitor. There are functional networks even within informal settlements and they become the everyday lived experience of the city, and of the claims to space within it. Informality is not an aberration, but rather a mode of urbanism in Sri Lanka. Since formal plans and regulations cannot respond to adaptive urbanization, planners and politicians, often in good faith, identify flexible collaborative and adaptive solutions to urban problems. While illegal or informal, these activities are an engine of growth through formal organization in many Asian cities. They respond to realities

of spatial practices and to the right to the city (Lefebvre 1996) and recognize that life in these settlements *is* urban life (Gaffikin and Perry 2012).

These practices are internalized in the planning and administrative culture as a form of 'institutionalized regulation' (Castells and Portres 1989) and imagined as 'para-legal' (Chatterjee 2004) or 'extra-legal' processes (de Soto 2000). Therefore, local planning students can easily comprehend and reconcile these hidden dynamics and their relationship to development in the local built environment. However, visiting planners and planning students need to realize this hybridity: the formal functioning planning system backed by legality and the informal, unwritten and invisible system that has strong links to politics and social networks. Visiting students and planners may see this as 'chaos' or 'illegality' in the development process in Sri Lanka, but this apparent duality and complexity in the context is the everyday reality of urban planning in the hybrid cities of the region.

### **The international planning project: Australian students' encounter with ethical challenges**

Between 2010 and 2014, the authors designed and co-ordinated four annual planning projects involving Australian planning students travelling to Sri Lanka for short (2–3 week) visits. Each has involved regional and local spatial strategy development plans and included Australian students coupled with students in an undergraduate programme at a Sri Lankan University. Project locations and focus sought to engage in the processes of local communication, data collection and strategy development. While focusing on spatial planning issues, the activities have sought to encompass elements of community engagement, local economic development and exploration of local governance issues. Some initial learning outcomes and student experiences from past activities have been reported elsewhere (Butt et al. 2011) and include negotiating the different cultures of planning practice, developing cross-cultural literacies and building a reflective approach to planning activities at 'home'. The authors of this paper have a background in planning practice and planning education in each country, and had been previously involved in exchange activities between Australia and Sri Lanka as participants in a Planning Institute of Australia/Red Cross post-tsunami capacity-building project.

The four visits involved students jointly undertaking field studies, survey activities, community meetings and developing planning and design concepts at local and regional level areas annually in a different, specific non-metropolitan location in Sri Lanka. These have included rural Uwa Province, Hambantota which is a tsunami-affected city where significant metropolitan-scale investment is occurring, Trincomalee, a city on the east coast where both post-tsunami and post-conflict redevelopment remain priorities and at Weligama on the south-east coast where an expanding tourism industry is reshaping economic potential after tsunami recovery. The project field activities were supported by lectures, seminars and online workshops before the trip, then in the field and, later, on return to the Sri Lankan university for the final stages of the project activity. Further project reflection was undertaken on return to Australia. The project design and partnership has been framed through consequent visits to Australia from Sri Lankan staff and students and ongoing staff and student connections. While we consider that such internalization is highly valuable, and funding support was made available for visits in both directions, it is important to note that not all enrolled students participated, and that the internationalization of curriculum, and the consideration of ethical dilemmas in practice were not addressed only through this component of the degree programme.

Over 75 Australian students have visited Sri Lanka in this programme. Over 30 Sri Lankan students have visited Australia. The evaluation project used mixed method approaches comprising pre- and post-visit surveys, participant interviews, student reports and author observations for each of Australian visit to Sri Lanka on a study visit and joint studio project experience. Additionally, in early 2012, an independently facilitated focus group was conducted comprising a sample of students

and graduates from each of three project visits (2010–2012) to further to reflect students' views on experiential learning in the field and to develop project components for future visits. Student discussions and reflective-journal reviews were collected in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Responses and observations from all of these are the basis of this analysis. In order to analyse responses, all comments were categorized into several themes: transferability of planning, ethical encounter, reflections on planning practice in both countries, informality in the planning practice and the lessons for planning in the 'home' setting. Notions of transference and of reflections for return practice resonated most strongly in the responses.

### ***Understanding planning transference and contingency***

... the issues are so different, I couldn't see what to do. (Student Response 2010)

Student responses typically reveal a desire to learn from unfamiliarity and that this was a motivation for participation. Students often saw this as a chance to become 'internationalized' planning professionals, but some recognized the usefulness at 'home' in this exposure. In part, this reflects self-selection amongst willing participants seeking an international experience, as the subject is not a core unit of the planning programme. However, on return, perspectives vary in two critical ways; in terms of the capacity to offer planning input in an unfamiliar setting rather than to simply 'observe', understandings of how this experience is relevant for planning practice back in Australia.

Working alongside Sri Lankan planning students can confront Australian planning students' models of problem-setting and solving. For some students, disjuncture between their own planning knowledge and local practice lead them to understand the complexity of the way things work and called for further inquiry of the planning system. Therefore, students dedicated considerable discussion and response to their preparedness for identifying planning priorities and for understanding the limits and boundaries to planning in Sri Lanka. The unfamiliarity of development (informality) contrasts with the familiar language and structures of planning as expressed through the legislation and strategy that is a focus of formal education. Walking between these extremes is a challenge identified by many participants.

... no matter where planning is practiced the fundamental planning principles are the same, however the manner in which it is practiced and implemented must reflect the local situation. (Student Response 2011)

What works in one country may not work in other - one solution is not the only solution. (Student Response 2012)

Then I realised ... the beach is not conceptualised in the same way as in Australia! (Student Response 2014)

Critically, students are often strongly aware of the lack of direct applicability of their own (Australian) planning project examples, however, *expressing* relevant planning ideas within the mixed student team in the project setting often emerges as a greater challenge. Many identified that the modes of communication and indeed of cultural practices of working in group-settings and the roles and status of participants, including local agencies, are more fundamental. Survey and interview findings tend to indicate that while students are aware of the need to develop cross-cultural literacies the skills in this area their pre-tour expectations appeared to under-estimate this challenge when in Sri Lanka. Many students indicated their literacies were not as developed as they had hoped. In this regard, student responses included:

... Australian students tend to speak first, rather than listen. (Student Observation 2012)

The experience reminded me that all you can do sometimes is sit and watch, instead of trying to influence activities ... in a cross-cultural situation. (Student Observation 2012)

A lot of the time I don't think they understood our ideas and we did not understand theirs. The differences in ideas were drastic despite the fact we are studying the same profession. (Student Observation 2014)

The authors observed a range of student responses including those who adamantly attempt to apply their ‘Australian’ planning knowledge and techniques, to those who appear to retreat from participation – and of course many participants operating between these extremes. Each student has had to negotiate his or her capacity to actively participate socially within the group and in relation to their knowledge of planning within the local context. Some students take on a different identity within the group than they are accustomed to, while others enact a familiar or accentuated role in group work as they adjust to the different modes and expectations of student group work, a cultural factor in the practice of planning. For some, the experience represents an opportunity to influence projects with assumed ‘universal’ planning knowledge – for others, it suggests that they lack useful contribution. The feelings of teamwork and the Australian students’ learning approaches were highlighted in Sri Lankan students’ responses:

Most of the Australian Students were doing their individual tasks while we [Sri Lankan students] always had group performing dimension or team work. (Student Observation 2012)

Australian students tended to express strong independent thoughts/voices as individuals even during team works. (Student Observation 2012)

As the comments indicate, Sri Lankan students also tended to appreciate different approaches to teamwork and its outcomes. They valued Australian students’ learning approaches as their Australian counterparts were more open and express independent opinion when working in groups. Most local students seemed to be comparatively reserved, perhaps as they thought that they would get things wrong. This appears due to a cultural barrier and a language barrier, despite similar ‘expert’ background in planning traditions and issues. This raises the issues of the value and management of cross-cultural team work, the values of participation, and of actively listening to diverse voices, but also its limitations in short-term encounters, notwithstanding preparation and preceding online dialogue between the cohorts.

Moreover, many Sri Lankan students expressed their reflections on Sri Lanka planning practice and Australian counterparts.

Australian students approached context analysis and scenario building stages not based on much quantitative or institutional-based approaches, but rather on more grounded or inquiry based approaches (value observations, visual surveys, participatory consultative processes) where collection of extensive data sets are not the priority - [whereas] we relied highly on comprehensive data sets. (Student Observation 2014)

This may be due to the fact that Sri Lankan students and planners commonly emphasize a rational comprehensive approach, process orientation and systems theory in practice. As a result, Sri Lankan students suggested that they favoured abstract theories. Adding to this point further, Sri Lankan students in these cohorts were more confident in collating and interpreting quantitative data and favoured modelling, whereas the subject Australian students demonstrated greater interest and capacity in interpreting the results and searching for underline meanings through observation, notwithstanding the challenges of this in an unfamiliar place.

### ***Reflecting on practice and formality***

Similarly, contrasting views are held in relation to transferability to Australian planning practice. While a most students consider the experience useful for reflection on practice at home, others consider the differences too great to readily extract value and transferable lessons. For some, the starkness of the Sri Lankan development situation challenges explicit linkages between power, politics and planning in ways that are masked and implicit in an Australian context.

The authors observed students who were aware of politics in decision-making and the power relationships evident in the built form of the urban landscape – particularly the informality of development and land use, but did not always see how a planning system actually existed in this setting. This was despite the engagement with these issues in pre-tour readings, briefings and online discussions with the Sri Lankan student cohort. The informality of certain planning procedures, the hybrid

and negotiated nature of dialogical decision-making and the direct political intervention in planning practice present significant dilemmas for students, but become clearer after discussions with Sri Lankan students and planners, and through field observations. Commonalities in process and ambition were also gleaned.

... I have gained an appreciation of the bureaucratic and social barriers to planning in a developing country. (Student Response 2010)

... there were developments that we would have considered to have not worked [and] some that you would wonder why they were put there. Some [were] organic development that just worked and fitted together. (Student Response 2014)

The pre tour reflective assignment prepared me for the different issues and layers of each the themes [vibrancy/culture of the street] to contemplate whilst in Sri Lanka, yet I still encountered new thoughts, some of which have evolved post trip. (Student Response 2014)

I anticipated that the planning system would be vastly different to ours purely because it was a developing country. I now realise that this is not the case. (Student Response 2014)

For students, the ethical challenges of conceptualizing these processes as being immovable problems, as opportunities for change or as culturally appropriate responses to local circumstance arose consistently during in-country discussions and also in post-visit debriefings. Student responses reflect both their unease with the seeming informality of space, and surprise and a desire to understand how such systems and places function despite the apparent lack (to them) of order and formality typical in urban Australia.

... with less order and structure in the public realm including roads, shopping strips, and other civic spaces can still actually function efficiently. (Student Response 2011)

What appears at first as dangerous chaos is in fact part of an underlying established system of sounds, actions and movements. (Student Response 2014)

Being in an unfamiliar and at times uncomfortable environment was challenging. (Student Response 2011)

It posed the questions in my mind what happens when there aren't planners? What happens when planners can't do what we considered their job to be? And what happens when planners fail to get it right? (Student Response 2014)

The way in which these reflections on spatial patterning are linked to understandings of power and politics in Australia is less clear from student responses. Australian students typically view the role of planning in Sri Lanka sceptically, with a difficulty in seeing a role for the institutions and systems of planning in what appears to be a chaotic built environment. Further, the role of 'non-planning' stakeholders (both public and private, powerful and powerless) in influencing development is more apparent in many locations, although this, of course, has parallels in the entrepreneurial or neo-liberal models of contemporary Australian planning. This understanding indicates a different reading of the way in which forms of development occur and the representations of urbanization, with a consequent planning response.

Longer term reflection indicated that many students understood that their learning only emerged in time. In part, this may be a product of the immediacy and short-term encounter of the fieldwork activity. Perhaps this indicates a dilemma in Healey's 'dynamic contingency' (2012) insofar as the recognition of issues of difference is not always immediately evident. Student reflections may also be an indication of the uncertainty associated with developing confidence in professional knowledge experienced by students anyway (although many have professional experience to some extent), and consequently the challenge of applying and extracting appropriate planning 'practices' in an otherwise unfamiliar setting. Comments from students' reveal:

... there were hidden learning outcomes ... (Student Response 2011)

One of the main things I learnt from this study tour was to look at a problem and explore what is causing the problem, as well as to know how to fix it. (Student Response 2014)

... what you learn you don't find out until you return to Australia. (Student Response 2011)

### **Understanding universal planning traditions and culturally contingency practices**

Student feedback has identified that the project activities and shared experiences, while not always familiar, have been supported by the shared knowledge and the language of planning theory and practice (Healey's 'universals'). Familiarity with planning history and consistent use of specific language and analytical techniques were often seen as common in both cohorts. However, the Australian students have also identified that they have been challenged by the different understandings of critical issues (culturally contingent) in development and the local agenda for planning practice. These issues include housing, transport, cultural practices in the use of public space, informal development, the seemingly overt intrusion of political objectives and the priorities for planning policy in a developmentalist polity undergoing significant urban transformation.

For planning students who work in international setting, these contextual practices can be masked within the seeming familiarity of planning language, concepts and techniques and the problematic desire for recognizable and comparative modes of global planning practice (Peck 2015). Students in the programmes described experienced that planning is inherently political and contextual, yet also that the explicit dilemmas of the political and economic setting can appear hidden during a field project where the apparently universal notions (and language) of effective spatial planning are central to the shared dialogue of a diverse student group.

### **Lessons for cross-cultural encounter and local planning**

Healey (2012) challenges planners to recognize a pathway between assumptions of universal knowledge and the surrender of any applicability beyond narrow local contexts by the development of *dynamic contingencies*; she calls for a *reflexivity* in applying what planners know and do to new circumstances. This approach, while sensible, proves difficult to know and to learn. Comparative enquiry offers a useful model to both explore these contingencies in new and familiar settings, using comparison '... as a means of glimpsing the processes and relations operating behind the backs of street-level actors, and as a means of rendering the familiar newly strange' (Peck 2015, 178).

For Australian students undertaking joint projects in Sri Lanka, and for those engaged in these locally, it is apparent that while planning offers some universal possibilities (and a universal problem-language), there is a general acceptance that local priorities and problems may not be best addressed with practice examples from elsewhere. This creates a dilemma for students in discovering what useful and transferable knowledge and skills they actually have.

The authors, over several visits, have found that students are able to best uncover this through engagement with local students and planners and through participation in data collection, discussions with local stakeholders and through broad and wide-ranging discussions regarding history, politics and culture. These are approaches that take time, however, and building relationships beyond the overseas project period is essential to students recognising similarities and differences in approaches to planning. Reflection, dialogue and cultural awareness each play a part in refining and defining how their developing planning knowledge has a role in a new place. Planning for more effective use of online and virtual meetings prior to the visit are important in this regard, but we also observed that these sessions, when undertaken, were not given their expected importance by a cohort so used to trans-global, virtual communications. Only when physically present did the utility of these prior discussions become apparent. These steps present challenges relating to modes of communication (not simply language), expectations of project work and time constraints for students in a full curriculum in both countries.

Over the period of four annual visits, we have sought to increasingly emphasize engagement and dialogue, using planning examples and practices as an important, but in some ways secondary,

vehicle for these activities. The universality of planning knowledge and language, while useful, at times appears to mask difference, whereas skills in communication, engagement and thorough observation and reflection appears to serve students better in equipping them to participate while away, and bring useful learning back to Australia.

Planning internationally presents significant ethical challenges that include those relating to the transferability, or imposition, of knowledge and practice. In educating students through international encounter, these challenges are heightened through the development of a 'planning' literacy, in addition to cultural literacy. The experiences of international study offer scope to learn adaptive and reflective practice, and typically students become aware of the limitations of a universal approach to planning, despite the historical tendencies in this regard and the shared language and understandings of planning students from different countries. Further, students began to understand and appreciate informal form of urbanism and direct politics in a more positive and practical framework. However, moving from this awareness to making effective choices about applicability of practice approaches or contingency approaches and examples, and understanding the potential positive roles of international practice is challenging for students (and no doubt for practitioners). Students' experiences reflect that complexity of the planning practice in different contextual settings. Their comments indicate and they tended to understand that there is no universally derived global approach to planning, but that practice includes modes of planning drawing on an assemblage of options and on functional necessity in local place. This offers a practical approach to finding planning solutions in complex, contingent environments.

International visits assist to understand that planning practice is associated with contextually contingent aims and values. Reviewing examples of how Australian students understand and respond to informality in practice provides excellent examples for this point. Australian students tended to initially understand informality in planning as simply a planning failure and as inconsistent with good planning. Yet understanding a practice requires contingent knowledge and reflection. The study also findings suggest students can be challenged on existing assumptions of universality in planning, and that this has consequences for perceptions of planning at 'home'. The field visits help students to consider the contextual aspect and planning is associated with political considerations of informality, development, and the disjuncture between plans and action. The emphasis on providing students with a joint studio experience in the international settings which include interactions in real planning projects rather than only study tours is a significant part of this mode of learning. Further, it is apparent that assigning students to work on small joint, live planning projects with informal engagements with stakeholders in the micro scale allows the development of insights to local conditions, governance structures, planning procedures and the 'really existing' local planning. We believe that continued encounters will help to construct cultural literacies and planning literacies and that would enhance the planning professionals understanding of the practical barriers to engaging in cross-cultural professional practice.

Engagement between visitors and local planners, and planning students, is important to achieve an international perspective, but additional engagement with communities, local data collection and shared group project activities present ways for students to truly reflect on what they actually know about planning, how this can be applied and what is transferable or adaptable. Discussions before, during and after international field visits covered a range of issues of concern for students. Understandings of politics, historical land management, culture and economic structures – in addition to planning knowledge – is required to take students through a process of ethical encounter with their own knowledge and culture, albeit in another place, and the recognition of adaptive 'dynamically contingent' approaches to planning practice in new contexts and settings.

## Note

1. These review activities have been conducted and reported subject to La Trobe University, Faculty Ethics Approvals 1012/12 and 20131/13.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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