Encountering the Unfamiliar in International Studies in Planning

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Abstract

The opportunities of internationalised planning curricula are manifold. For students this includes scope to expand their horizons for planning careers and to develop more reflective understandings of planning issues in their 'home' environment (Yigitcanlar, 2013). For educators, it provides a fertile environment for exploring cross-cultural encounter, a space to investigate varied planning traditions, and to situate examples for teaching. Within planning education, professional and academic discourse offers a way for students from diverse backgrounds to communicate and conceptualise field studies within a common (universal) understanding of traditions of planning practice and public policy solutions, but also to consider those contingent on place and culture (Healey, 2012). The ethical and political implications of working internationally can, however, be masked within the seeming familiarity of planning language, concepts and techniques. Planning is inherently political and contextual, yet the explicit dilemmas of the political and economic setting can 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 and political settings. It then considers the implications and transferability of these lessons for ethical reflection in planning practice within the home setting.

Keywords*: cultural literacy, international study*

1 Introduction

Zygmunt Bauman (1990:15) contends, "familiarity is the staunchest enemy of inquisitiveness and criticism". Yet using and guiding discomfort and confusion into the unfamiliar requires student planners not just to encounter the unsettling 'other', but to learn from this encounter, despite its challenges. This offers a significant opportunity for a planning education that is reflective and challenges normative (and localised) assumptions of practice and of problem fomation. Planning's own inherent tendency towards universalism in problem-setting and practice is challenge to this. These received logics of practice often mask the value of cross-cultural encounters; planning problems and solutions can look and feel familiar to students and practitioners from elsewhere, despite vastly different cultural and economic settings.

Internationalising the curriculum for planning educators provides a pathway into these learning opportunities as well as offering attractive options for students seeking possibilities in a globalising profession. There is capacity to demonstrate diversity through various education settings. Yet while these objectives can often be interwoven through the classroom setting, international field studies provide a most effective way to explore the practices of planning in 'other' settings, and also to provide examples for reflection 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 these activities is wide-ranging, and strongly personalised, but typically includes an expanded awareness of the scope of professional planning practice and the development of a *critical reflexivity* in relation to previously assumed norms of planning and urbanism at home. Further, an often-reported outcome relates to learning from the encounter of difference with consequent benefits for engagement and communication in planning practice in diverse communities (Abramson 2005, Yigitcanlar et al 2009, Butt et al, 2011). This suggests a range of questions regarding the cultural, political and socio-economic setting of the international experience.

This paper focuses the way in which Australian planning students consider the ethical and political setting in relation to project activities and personal encounter in a developing nation. The paper will report on student feedback and supervisors' observations over four annual international field studies programs from an Australian university to Sri Lanka undertaken alongside local planning students. It considers the planning values and knowledge that appear universal to the discipline and those that are contingent upon the cultural, economic and political setting and the ways that students engage with this contrast and its consequences for scholarship and professionalism in planning.

2 Planning and Internationalism

Planning as an international field of practice, with consequent modes of policy transfer, has a long tradition. Whether in its visionary and value-laden inception in the early Twentieth Century, during the zenith of the rational and instrumental methods of comprehensive planning, or through the more recent consideration of collaborative modes within neo-liberal agendas, transitional flows of practice, ideals and education have persisted. While contemporary planning practice is ostensibly more reflexive and pluralistic in its intent – recognising the highly contextualised 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.

The dilemma of planning as a universal, while local, project has been identified in regard to the suitability of policy transfer (Burke, 1967; Ward, 2000; 2010), with developmental phases of the post-colonial era being the most acute examples of where context, cultures and priorities have collided with an international (usually developed world) agenda for planning. While difference 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) based-in-place. Recognizing and unravveling this difference is important not of international relevance, but is also central to communicative and engaged practice at 'home'.

Healey (2012) identifies that the decline in the unitary 'modernisation' myth in planning has allowed, and indeed required, reconsideration of the directions and necessity for the transfer of knowledge, practice and techniques. However, despite this, packaged and decontextualized examples remain prominent in contemporary planning practice – ideas are seen, taken-up and reproduced through global education approaches. She contends that while ideas and assumed 'good' practices still flow, they continue to risk a new hegemony at the expense of locally-developed invention.

Yet rejecting such transfer potentially results in extreme localism – hence the need for universality of some ideas, with others being contingent on context. Planning practice remains a largely normative exercise, concerned with how things *ought* to be, and examples of this are often best sought, and presented through comparative example from elsewhere. Healey concludes that a 'dynamic contingency' or reflective consideration of universal planning ideas is necessary – however this throws up new challenges for internationalised education and students and professionals negotiating this dynamism by making choices regarding the suitability of transfer for their developing planning knowledge. The crucial questions appear to relate to the capacity to make judgments regarding an appropriate stance or action (or planning practice) that is neither ill-suited nor lacking cognisance of the setting, while recognising that elements of 'good' planning practice are potentially pervasive, including those relating to an ethical stance such as equity, justice, as well as aspects more technical in nature.

The internationalisation of planning practice and planning education is challenged by dilemmas of understanding, assumptions of professional norms and challenges to the value of knowledge. Yet these

experiences potentially serve three important purposes. They create reflection in values and cultural literacy in engagement and encounter, create a sense of participation in a 'globalised' profession. Ultimately they expand and deepen students' knowledge, skills and experience, which are valuable for students' personal and professional development and relevant in any setting. They require students/planners to consider and separate *aconscious* knowledge and practice from contextually contingent aims and values and international immersion offers this opportunity most readily.

2.1 Internationalised Planning Curricula

The forms that this 'internationalisation' takes vary and could be considered to include attention to 'global' issues of population, governance and urbanization, the encounter provided by international student cohorts I various education markets globally and also the opportunities to study abroad as a studio/project or on exchange. 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 internationalisation *imperative* within Australian higher education in recent years, and while dominated (perhaps fleetingly) by an international education 'market', the benefits of encounter and outward movement are seen positively. This is in line with the global formation of corporatized models of higher education, linked to its *economization* and the mobility of labour markets (Spring, 2015). The counter-flows from developed economies to less-developed regions are typically in the form of exchange, field studies and comparative research.

Internationalised planning curricula have been identified as a product of an expressed need and awareness from staff and students. Ali and Doan (2006), for example, identify emergent strategies for internationalisation in their survey of planning curricula in the United States. Goldstein et al (2005) suggest a globalisation 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, Absolum and Vadura (2006: 332) recognise that "simply adding international content is not enough" in their study of students at the University of South Australia; students consider *interaction* to be a critical part of their education. Clifford (2009) identifies that less 'pure' disciplines are able to contextualise these experiences well – a seeming advantage for planning education.

2.2 Ethics, Politics and Experiential Learning

In disciplines such as planning, experiential modes of teaching and learning are often common and have a long history through fieldwork and studio/project activity. A primary intention of such experiential approaches is to explore a range of themes and issues through the context of a project, problem or encounter. Consequently (and evidently), context matters; with the social, environmental and political setting being entangled in the project space. For students, this means that such factors are central to the project task, rather than a potentially decontextualized example in the classroom. Such approaches, while potentially powerful, also assume and rely on this understanding, notwithstanding the preparation and pre-briefing that is typically associated with these activities. In this regard, the ethics, cultures and politics of doing planning are in fact given prominence in informing and guiding method and practice. In an international setting these elements are amplified through cross-cultural understanding, or lack thereof, and familiarity with the agenda for planning practice and priorities.

Consequently, for students involved in international settings, ethical dilemmas exist not only in knowing, and in learning from habits in practice grounded in culturally contingent settings, but also in reflecting on suitable lessons for transference – an issue that extends in both directions. In this regard, we consider a range of potentially 'contingent' issues that consistently confront our Australian planning students in Sri Lanka: (i) the exercise of patronage politics and power, (ii) the resources and priorities of development and (iii) the nature of informality in the use of space and the development of

the urban environment. At times each of 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. We outline these issues below.

3 Sri Lankan Planning: from post-colonial lessons to globalisation

The modern Sri Lankan planning system has links to British colonial planning system, as does Australian planning. In early 20th century, British colonial government introduced planning regulations and practices to Sri Lanka. Based on these Colonial procedures, localised plans and development projects were progressively implemented in cities as well as some regional areas, firstly through the *Housing and Town Improvement Ordinance* 1918 and the *Town and Country Planning Ordinance* 1946. Reflecting international trends, the early planning approaches in Sri Lanka tended to emphasise comprehensive master-planning. This produced a centralised, rigid, and top-down planning approach that dominated in 1930s until the 1980s – a legacy that continues today.

The involvement of international planners such as Patrick Abercrombie and agencies including the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reinforced the 'borrowed' planning of the colonial era even after Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948 in projects such as the UNDP *Colombo Master Plan* (1978*)* The desired outcomes of past master-plans and regional plans were not well contextualised within local cultural and economic settings and did not deliver expected physical and social development at the ground level (Steinberg 1984, van Horen, 2002). This has been attributed to the often-identified drawbacks of master planning processes; inflexibility, lack of fluidity, inability to tackle uncertainty and inability to cope with the rapid urban growth that occurred in urban areas during 1980s (van Horen et al, 2004). These approaches also raised questions about the suitability of broad planning goals for local problems, especially where local problems and solutions were identified through Euro-centric or universalist lenses rather than from an insider's point of view. Additionally Sri Lanka's political challenges since the 1980s have hindered the implementation of urban plans.

From the 1980s economic liberalization policies were introduced in Sri Lanka resulting in unprecedented urbanisation and urban development. This resulted in significant population growth and new urban forms with linear development along main roads and slum settlements becoming common features in urban areas. In order to manage urban growth, promote integrated development and to effectively enforce the statutory planning framework, the *Urban Development Authority* (UDA) was established in 1980. The UDA planning process provided a new framework to prepare much needed strategic plans with a more flexible structure planning and developmentalist perspective. Accordingly, local level development plans for urban and regional areas were progressively prepared for almost all urban areas under the guidance of UDA. Additionally, the UDA has also prepared regional level framework plans such as the *Colombo Metropolitan Regional Structure Plan* (UDA, 1998, Munasinghe, 2009). These plans indicate emergent flexible planning approaches extending beyond conventional master-planning processes.

Planners and policy-makers further adapted emergent modes of strategic and collaborative planning during the last two decades. Accordingly, the *National Physical Planning Department* (NPPD) was formed in 2001 to offer a statutory framework for preparing national, provincial and regional level structure plans through the *Town and Country Planning (Amendment) Act*, 2001). The subsequent *National Physical Structure Plan*, (2005) proposed nationally important strategic development projects including ports, domestic and international airports and highways. Since 2005, the incumbent government has taken measures to implement identified strategic projects (often through foreign direct investment) particularly evident in the Southern Growth Centre area under the *Hambantota Regional Development Plan* (UDA 2007) and development and renewal projects in Colombo Metropolitan area. The Hambantota plan received considerable political patronage from the previous Sri Lankan

President and mainly involved direct investment from Chinese government agencies (De Alwis, 2010). More recent planning and development projects have been undertaken within the strongly directional objectives of post-conflict reconstruction and the involvement of a range of state agencies, including the military.

4 How is Sri Lankan planning familiar and unfamiliar to Australian planners?

As Healey (2012) describes, the universal knowledge and practice of planning is contrasted with elements that are contextualised in place. For students in both places, apparently 'universal' ciphers of planning exist in the form of a common British legislative tradition, the language of planning and the shifting modes of practice from past comprehensive master-planning to current developmentalist and neo-liberal approaches that have become typical in both places. Yet from an Australian planning perspective, the 'contingent' or 'unfamiliar' roles of planning and the conception of planning relate to issues including the visible exercise of power and patronage, the collisions of traditional and introduced models of administration, resources to realise planning outcomes and the informality of urbanization and development in general.

4.1 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 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 organised along sectoral lines with relationships to central power. They do not have autonomy to guide their future in policy making, nor do they have a fiscal base to realise development plan proposals. The prevailing provincial and local government systems has resulted in dependency on the central government. Instead of implementing proactive plans, provincial and local government have become agencies to disseminate central political agendas and strengthen the voter base of the centre.

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 Baumann's (1987) 'legislators', rather than as actors within the active policy-networks described by Hajer (2009). What is different in Sri Lanka however is the visible exercise of patronage politics without consequent enframing narratives of planning rationality and the resource limitations and centralization with a resulting disjuncture between plans and on-ground outcomes.

4.2 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 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.

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 (Gaffin & Perry, 2012). For example, Alexandroni (2007) argues there is nowhere else in the world that deals with more corrupt money than the City of London with implications for urban development. 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 et al, 2007). In Sri Lanka, slum settlements, illegal constructions and development deregulation have been identified as informal practices (REEL, 1998; The Sunday Times, 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.

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 urbanisation, 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 organisation in many Asian cities. They respond to realities of spatial practices and the to right to city (Lefebvre, 1996) and recognize that life in these settlements *is* urban life (Gaffin and Perry, 2012).

These practices are internalized in the planning and administrative culture as a form of 'institutionalised regulation' (Castells & Portres, 1989) imagined as a 'para–legal' (Chatterjee, 2004) or 'extra legal' processes (de Soto, 1989). Therefore, local planning students can easily comprehend these hidden dynamics and its relationship to development in the local built environment. However, foreign planners and planning students need to realise this hybridity: the formal functioning planning system backed by legality and the informal, unwritten and invisible system that has strong links to politics. 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.

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

Between 2010 and 2014 the authors have 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 strategy development projects and included Australian students coupled with students in an undergraduate program 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 learning outcomes and students experiences from past activities have been reported elsewhere (Butt et al, 2011, Butt and Ratnayake, 2012) and are considered to include negotiating varied 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 project.

The four visits involved students jointly undertaking field studies, survey activities and community meetings over various years in a number of non-metropolitan locations in Sri Lanka. These have included rural Uwa Province, Hambantota which is a tsunami-affected city in the south where significant new investment in metropolitan-scale infrastructure is occurring, Trincomalee, a city on the east coast where both post-tsunami and post-conflict redevelopment remain priorities and 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 workshops before the trip, in the field and on return to the Sri Lankan university. 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.

Over 75 students have visited Sri Lanka with responses obtained through pre and post visit surveys, interviews, student reports and author observations for each visit and additionally, in early 2012, an independently-facilitated focus group comprising a sample of students and graduates from each of three project visits (2010-2012) and student discussions and reflective-journal reviews in 2014[1].

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 state undergoing transformation.

5.1 Understanding planning transference and ethical encounter

Student responses reveal a desire to learn fro unfamiliarity and that this was a motivation for participation. Students often saw this mainly 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 program. 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 along with Sri Lankan planning students confronts Australian planning students. 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.

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

[1] These review activities have been conducted and reported subject to Faculty Ethics Approvals 1012/12 and 20131/13

"…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 realized…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 they lack useful contribution.

5.2 Reflecting on practice

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 extract value and transferable lessons. For some, the starkness of the Sri Lankan 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. 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.

> *"…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)*

For students, the ethical challenges of conceptualizing these processes as being either immovable problems, a 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)*
>
> *"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 skeptically, 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)*

6 Lessons for cross-cultural encounter and local planning

Healey (2012) challenges planners to recognise 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, while sensible, proves difficult to know and learn. For Australian students

undertaking joint projects in Sri Lanka, it is apparent that while planning offers some universal possibilities, 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 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. 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 three annual visits, we have sought to increasingly emphasise 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 of knowledge and practice. In educating students through international encounter, these challenges are heightened through the development of a 'planning' literacy, in additional to cultural literacy. The experiences of international study offer scope to learn adaptive and reflective practice, and typically students are 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 and examples, and understanding the potential positive roles of international practice is challenging for students (and no doubt for practitioners).

Engagement between visitors and local planners and planning students helps 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. Understanding 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.

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