

Educating Planners for the New Challenge of Sustainability, Knowledge and Governance: Report from a EU/US Exploratory Collaborative Project in Planning Education

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1. Introduction

This paper will report on the project “Educating Planners for the New Challenge of Sustainability, Knowledge and Governance” (PLAN-ED), aimed at the international exchange of planning knowledge, methodologies, and practices and the tuning of competences and learning outcomes in urban and regional planning degree-granting institution. The project was funded under the EU/US collaborative Atlantis programme. In practice, the project created a forum and a comparative framework in which four planning schools in very different geo-political contexts in the EU and the USA considered and debated innovative planning and policy solutions and their role as educators through knowledge sharing. These aims were in response to the realisation that urban planners across the globe are facing new common environmental, political and socioeconomic challenges (Hague et al, 2006).

This paper will reflect on the approach taken by Atlantis and PLAN-ED for promoting the comparability, transparency, and interchangeability of planning knowledge, practices, and skills. We will first describe the project rationale, activities and second assess its achievements and shortcomings within the broader analytical discourse around transnationality of planning knowledge and practice.

2. Plan-Ed: rational, activities, results

Aims and objectives of the project activities

The policy project PLAN-ED was funded mainly by the US Fund for Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and the EU’s Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency

(EACEA) who supported mainly travel expenses. The four university partners contributed some match funding. The consortium consisted of four institutions:

- University of the West of England, Bristol, Department of Planning and Architecture (EU Project Leader) (UWE)
- Leibniz Universität Hannover, Germany, Faculty of Architecture and Landscape Science, Institute of Environmental Planning (LUH)
- Virginia Commonwealth University, L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, Richmond, Virginia (U.S. Project Leader) (VCU)
- Portland State University, Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning

As a policy orientated measure to address comparative higher education and vocational training issues, as well as promoting dialogue on recognition of qualifications and accreditation, it only attracted EUR 70,000 and USD 70,000 over 24 months from the two main funders over the period September 2010 to August 2012 and was then extended to complete the programme to March 2013.

The rationale of the project was that in a context of global challenges, it is critical to rethink the way in which planning education responds to the call by local governments, planning agencies, and the non-profit sector for innovative approaches to planning. The overarching academic aims of the project were for EU and US colleagues to learn first-hand about national and local policy and governance approaches to addressing key regeneration challenges such as sprawl, social inclusion, environmental planning, public health and then explore links between local planning schools and local communities and how these challenges and relationships translate into the planning curriculum. The main objectives of the proposed effort were to:

(1) enhance the curriculum of each participating institution through knowledge sharing and faculty exchange.

(2) promote the exposure of visiting faculty to local planning practices and solutions to be critically evaluated and integrated in the planning curricula of their respective institutions.

(3) develop a model and set of teaching tools to be adopted in the long run by other planning institutions in order to tune learning outcomes and planning competences transnationally.

Themes identified for the project

A set of activities were organised around four interrelated thematic areas concerning planning for sustainability, and designed to promote the comparability, transparency, and transferability of knowledge, practices, and skills taught in planning schools set in different international and geo-political contexts.

These themes built upon the expertise and interests of the four partners as well as on the recognition that they are critical issues for planning both in the U.S. and Europe and therefore with an impact on planning education on both sides of the Atlantic. The four partner institutions have been engaged in various activities around these topics and are keen to foster trans-continental links and dialogue to further knowledge sharing and curriculum development around these themes.

a. Sprawl, growth management, and affordable housing

The amount of urban and suburban land used in the current development of many regions in the USA far exceeds the amount needed to accommodate population and economic growth. This trend has produced increasing costs for public services, disinvestment in central cities, shifts in traffic patterns and increasing levels of congestion and pollution, and the destruction of farmland and open space. Growth management initiatives – such as those implemented in the Portland region and other U.S. metropolitan areas – have been very successful in counteracting these trends. In Europe, compromises between maintaining green belts and need for economic expansion in (mainly Northern) major metropolitan growth areas also require strategic and innovative thinking to ensure sustainable development. Different issues but yet for both the USA and Europe, one of the key challenges, however, is represented by the tension often arising between growth management strategies and the provision of affordable housing.

b. Poverty concentration, urban regeneration, and social inclusion

Urban labour markets in industrialised countries have experienced substantial shifts during the past three decades: while job growth has tended to be concentrated in those sectors that are both high- and low-technology based and draw upon a mix of skilled technicians as well as unskilled workers, manufacturing and other blue-collar industries have increasingly relocated out of central cities or have been outsourced. At the same time, racial discrimination in housing and mortgage markets and insufficient affordable housing in areas of job growth have continued to prevent many from moving with their traditional sources of employment. The resulting jobs-housing imbalance has been exacerbated by the recent economic downturn and has widened the already significant income inequalities, spatial and social polarizations, and inequities in opportunity structures and resource distribution. Policy and planning responses to this problem range from place-based initiatives – such as community revitalisation and urban regeneration – to personal mobility programmes tied to state housing and labour market policies. In some cases, such as in the United Kingdom, social inclusion represents a key item in the government agenda addressing poverty concentration and inner-city disinvestment, in order to promote an equitable redistribution of resources and opportunities.

c. Environmental planning and public health

Global warming, soil degradation, environmental pollution, biodiversity loss, the dependence on non-renewable resources, and the overconsumption of energy and natural resources represent growing threats to the quality of life, public health, and sustainability of regions in industrialized countries and other parts of the world. Some of these are the direct product of dominant economic and metropolitan growth patterns. For instance, suburbanization and urban sprawl have long contributed to the depletion of natural environmental resources and to increasing social and environmental costs such as traffic congestion and air pollution. The growing dependence on automobile and the decreasing reliance on walking and biking have a profound impact on widespread rates of obesity and other health-related problems, even if some cities (e.g. Freiburg and Hannover in Germany), helped with strong regional or city leadership are trying to reverse the trend by developed innovative models for regional and urban development. Further, increasing health disparities between inner-city low-income and minorities communities and suburban residents are partly the result of the disproportionate exposure of these groups to environmental hazards such as noise, ambient air, waste treatment, storage, and disposal facilities and the lack of good health-promoting resources, such as fresh produce outlets and organic food stores and access to parks and sports facilities.

d. Governance and planning decision-making, community participation, and social equity

The downscaling of nation-state governance and the ensuing reduction of funding for basic welfare provisions has made planning for sustainability an ever challenging task. Localities are increasingly left with the responsibility of making up for the shortfalls generated by global socio-economic, environmental, and political shifts. The effectiveness of urban and regional planning to deliver sustainable and equitable natural and community development depends largely on local capacity building and access to planning decision making by the sectors of society that have historically been disenfranchised, and on the creation of a strong framework for regional cooperation and multi-level governance.

Key activities have included faculty travel to partner institutions, guest lectures, site visits and meetings with local practitioners focusing on the themes identified above. Each partner university hosted a five day seminar consisting of presentation, interactive workshops and linked to the planning, policy, and educational challenges of the host institution's context. Local urban planning students and faculty, key stakeholders, and practitioners were invited to participate and contribute to seminars providing an opportunity for in-depth exchanges of ideas and perspectives on a particular planning and policy challenge. The medium-large cities in which the participating institutions are located (Bristol, Hannover, Richmond, and Portland) represent the cores of larger metropolitan areas, each facing specific planning challenges. These regions exemplify contexts in which very different approaches and solutions have addressed very similar planning and policy challenges. The four planning programmes have developed links with local and regional stakeholders through integration of studio projects in their curricula, guest lectures and visiting professorships, research contracts and commissioned work. The planning projects generated by these planning programmes represent excellent examples of how faculty and students have responded to planning and policy challenges in their regions and developed sound planning solutions. The local contexts of participating institutions represent, therefore, a suitable opportunity for the comparative approach to planning knowledge and practice that the PLAN-ED project entailed.

The results of workshops were discussed and evaluated in plenary sessions. In addition, the workshops represented an opportunity for visiting faculty to identify and explore transferable planning skills acquired by students at the host institution.

Results and outcomes of the project

The collaborative project was innovative and useful in providing a multi-national, interdisciplinary and problem-based approach to teaching and learning in planning for sustainability. First, the project has provided seed funding for identifying the themes and some of the skills needed for planners to deliver sustainable communities. Second, the project has exposed teaching staff and students to very different planning cultures, professions, practice and focus. Third, with globalization, internationalization of curriculum has become a vital part of participating institutions' priorities. Academics on the projects have exchanged case studies that could be incorporated into modules, courses and comparative publications. For instance, the idea of bike boulevard from Portland being now used as a good case study of active travel in a first year module Healthy Sustainable Communities at the University of the West of England, taught to more than 110 students in 2012-13. The project can only be considered as seed funding for the strengthening of the existing comparative approach to planning education: this has led to subsequent visits by UWE for instance to potential partners in Vietnam (not funded by the project), and other cities and universities in the USA in the

specific field of healthy urban planning where colleagues were able to discuss activities around the development of a shared knowledge base between public health and planning, the issues of North-South dialogue and activities in the field. Fourth participants had also discussed opportunities for student exchanges and international field trips, and long-term plans for webinars and distance learning. The results were more modest in that respect and mainly included offering opportunities for academics to deliver guest lectures in on-going courses and meet students and staff at host institutions. The more ambitious objective to draft a preliminary plan for the incorporation of distance learning tools and webinars in planning curricula is a more difficult task to achieve, in view of the amount of resources and technical difficulties.

We also wanted to develop a model and set of teaching tools to be adopted in the long run by other planning institutions in order to tune learning outcomes and planning competences transnationally. This was an objective dictated by the Atlantis programme's ambitions to ensure sustainability of funded projects. This is an arduous objective that will take time to achieve and that must be developed within the broader context of the Atlantis programme rationale and methodology.

3. Analysis: the added value of multilateral, transatlantic cooperation in the project

The proposed project has played a role in enhancing teaching and research at the participating institutions. As said above, the project exposed faculty members and students to the teaching philosophy, methods, and evaluation criteria adopted by the participating institutions' planning programmes. However, this narrow objective was also meant to lead, within the sustainability rationale of the Atlantis programme to *the tuning of competences and learning outcomes in urban and regional planning degree-granting institutions transnationally*.

Sustainability of the project depends on internal and external factors. Internal factors include for instance whether the aims and objectives of the project were realistic given the limited funding and offered the right methodology. As far as these are concerned, first the impact beyond the consortium will be mainly achieved via the dissemination of good practice identified during the four seminars. It was limited though as there was no funding for synthesis case study evidence or seminar findings. The project has nevertheless allowed the partners to network in their peer groups through conference and seminar attendance. It has introduced the difficulties of curriculum integration beyond the EU and Bologna process. Second, the project methodology itself can also be exported to other institutions as it worked well: identification of themes, week long seminar with input from practice and academia. It gave the key participants the ability to meet a range of stakeholders and network. But it is an expensive methodology both in terms of funding required and pressures on the environment that included initially 30 long haul flights. We did not have enough resources however to consider the practice of transferring planning practices to other contexts, of key importance to help us develop a comparative curricula at home.

External factors that we need to consider to assess the sustainability of the project include the overarching rationale and the processes of the Atlantis programme itself. Are they fit for

purpose? Atlantis aims at addressing challenges of globalisation through education policy (a key top-down, formally institutionalised and regulated policy and sector) through a bottom-up approach (project led by individual researchers). It offers funding over a maximum of two years for a policy-orientated measure, and doubles the administrative reporting burden, US partners having to report to FIPSE and EU partners to EACEA. Both funding source impose different processes to assess the project.

Atlantis is part of a range of EU cooperation programmes with industrialised nations that include the USA, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea. The Atlantis programme itself was set up in the 1990s to promote understanding between people of the EU and the USA and to improve the quality of their human resource development. It supports consortia of higher education and training institutions working together at undergraduate or graduate levels to improve their educational services, to compare and modernize curricula and to develop joint study programmes with full recognition of credits and qualifications. The programme is set within a neo-liberal framework of economic cooperation and growth between the USA and the EU. The education and training sectors were very much seen as a means to build bridges across the Atlantic and be key tools “to increase synergies across the Atlantic as we become more knowledge-based economies” (EU, 2006). EU’s norm for Atlantis probably agrees with Vertovec’s assessment that transnationalism is linked to new patterns of capital formation that involve globe-spanning structures or networks that have largely become disconnected from their national origins (Vertovec, 2009 quoted in Rizvi, 2010). One of the tools of economic growth, education and training, therefore identifies to this model and develops transnationally. Our initial project approach also recognized that in the era of globalisation, cities face similar challenges and developing transnational fora for knowledge sharing is appropriate. Universities have also interest in promoting internationalisation and transnational offerings to students in a competitive environment both to attract foreign students who will pay higher fees than home or EU students and also build their students’ skills for the economic, social, cultural and environmental challenges of globalisation.

In this policy context, funding was then made available to US and EU universities to integrate their curricula and develop mobility of staff and students. The project partners need to report whether they have achieved the programme of activities promised and delivered products and results identified. While the aims are laudable to promote cultural understanding and promote economic cooperate and the EU, the logic for assessing the success of the project takes a very management approach: one of good project management, timely delivery of activities and products and value for money that is generic, one fits all for all academic and training areas funded.

To meet the evaluators’ criteria, we needed to follow discourses on economic globalisation and normative assumptions as well as good project management approach. Hence our ambitions were for the project to help us to:

- enhance the curriculum of each participating institution,
- tune learning outcomes and planning competences transnationally
- promote the exposure of visiting faculty to local planning practices and solutions.
- encourage international networking and collaboration and thinking outside the local institutional box

As we saw above the project was successful at delivering better understanding of good practice in the field of sustainable planning between the partners. But as the funding was

mainly for implementing activities and deliver products, little resources were devoted to reflect on more theoretical issues that should come to the fore before integrating planning curricula and developing mobility. How to reconcile generic transnationalism of education emerging through market and need for new skills, i.e. the Atlantis orthodoxy, and scope and limit of international or transnational planning research or the place-based skills required by the practice and profession of spatial planners ?

Two broad areas that we could not explore fully during our project included for instance an exploration of the validity of transnational planning ideas. We did not consider for instance the scope and validity of “planning knowledge” sharing, transnationality of curriculum and mobility. This is an important issue to consider if, like Healy, we consider that the goals of planning include spatial justice, healthy and sustainable cities and economic growth (Healy and Upton, 2010), hugely contentious areas of policy with redistributive impact, with wide ranging number of stakeholders. National planning cultures have evolved in different national contexts, each characterised by different balance of power between state, citizens and market. Transnational planning needs to interact with local contexts or place-specific milieu to develop planning activities. Ignoring this would reduce planning solutions to policy tourism and not necessarily produce the right solutions. Planning educators need to be careful as well not to let students fall into that trap.

The second area we could not explore further was the identity of planning itself, both as an academic subject and a profession. Identifying the key features of planning as an academic subject and a profession would have helped us to validate intercontinental knowledge sharing in the field of planning and consider whether any of the solutions identified in our seminars could travel geographically and could embed themselves in a different local settings. For instance, Myers (Myers, 1997) identified six cross-cutting themes that he associated with a unique intellectual identity for planning: focus on improvement of human settlements, on interconnecting among distinct community facets, on the future and pathways of change over time, on identification of the diversity of needs and distributional consequences in human settlements, on open participation in decision-making and on linking knowledge and collective action. We could have considered these themes in the age of social network and climate change within the context of comparative EU/US planning governance. Another list of core themes that could have focused our comparative discussions can be found in the aspirational value set forth in the AICP code of ethics that identify key themes and values associated with the practice of planning in communities including overall responsibility of planners to the public, to clients and employers and to the planning profession and colleagues. Other questions that are of concern to planning educators and that our project highlighted but could not comprehensively debate included for instance: how can we ensure that our graduates leave with more than a toolbox of analytical and presentational abilities, how can we connect them to the values of the field and making them more effective idealists? What is the appropriate balance between structure and interdisciplinarity? Are we teaching practice or research? Are we promoting bureaucracy or advancing a progressive agenda? (Selztzer, E. introduction to the Portland Seminar October 2011).

Our project objectives had to fit the conditions for a policy-orientated measure or policy change rather than for the underpinning research and evidence base required for the policy change. We offered to address complex challenges of an academic sector through knowledge sharing activities without being required to set the right framework for undertaking comparative planning research. However, seen as an exploratory exercise for future comparative planning research, our project was invaluable in two aspects. First, it gave us opportunities through visiting and examining local case studies to inform an analytical

framework for examining planning practice across continent and improving it through the interpretation and transfer of experience from one country to another. It could also be very valuable to help us consider planning theory by transcending national cultural boundaries. It was therefore useful to scope two key purposes of comparative planning studies (Masser, 1984). It helped us understand first hand rigour and resources required for comparative work to avoid policy tourism. Sustainability of the project will depend, in the end, on how individual researchers use knowledge they acquired during the project to develop their own comparative research.

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