



Urban studies and the challenge of embedding sustainability: A review of international master programmes



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ABSTRACT

The United Nations declaration of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UN DESD, 2004–2014) advocates the need for universities to embed sustainability in all learning areas. This inquiry examines how selected post-graduate top-level programmes in urban studies are adapting their curricula to promote sustainable urban development. We start by reviewing an extensive literature to identify the principles and practices characterising the UN DESD, and to identify the topics and themes considered essential for teaching aimed at the promotion of sustainable urban development. Based on the extensive literature review we define an analytical framework in five parts, related to various aspects of curricular content and teaching and learning approaches: programme orientation, skills, ethics and critical reasoning, interdisciplinarity and content related to sustainable urban development issues. We then conduct an empirical study of 25 among the best post-graduate level (MA and MSc) programmes in urban studies from Europe, China, the USA and the Global South, to see how they are adapting their curricula to the requirements of sustainable urban development captured in the analytical framework. While acknowledging the significant context specificities that must be respected, and the multiple challenges that must be reconciled when defining urban studies curricula - we find both strengths and weaknesses in these top programmes, including important differences among the programmes from the four regions. Our data suggests that important steps are being taken towards ‘whole-system’ transformation envisaged by the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, but also that transformative factors depending on cultural and institutional values and practices remain relatively weak.

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‘the global transformation of higher education towards sustainable development has yet to occur’

UNESCO (2014: 31)

1. Introduction

The need to reorient education towards sustainable development became a policy priority at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). The responsibility to articulate this need was given to UNESCO and the

United Nations declaration of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2004–2014) marks a major effort ‘aimed at integrating the principles and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning, to encourage changes in knowledge, values and attitudes with the vision of enabling a more sustainable and just society for all’ (UNESCO, 2014: 9). Thus – like sustainable development itself – its ethos is fundamentally normative.

For higher education institutions the DESD advocates the need to address the complexity of current real-world contexts by embedding sustainability in all learning areas across university curricula. Indeed, over the decade notions of sustainability and sustainable development have been increasingly institutionalized (Dyment et al., 2015), however, this has been a slow process. UNESCO (2014) recently recognized that a full integration of sustainable values into higher education systems has yet to take place

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in most countries, which implies that further efforts are required to ensure that sustainability and sustainable development become an integral part of the academic culture. Education for sustainability is still lacking a consistent interdisciplinary conceptual framework (Jabareen, 2012), and a coherent curriculum for sustainability and sustainable development remains a challenge (Ryan et al., 2010). Thus, it is not surprising that during the UN Summit for Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro (2012), governments reiterated the need to support higher education institutions in their efforts to secure the research, innovation and skills needed to advance national sustainable development objectives.

In this context, urban development and the fields of study that shape the next generation of scholars, planners, architects and urbanists are a critical arena for sustainability education: urbanisation is amongst the most significant global trends of the 21st century and provides the setting and underlying base for global change (UN Habitat, 2012) – thus, its sustainability is a matter of priority. The DESD focussed on climate change, biodiversity and disaster risk as key development issues for education, and UN member states identified health, water, biodiversity, climate change and energy as the new ‘top five issues’ to be addressed through education: urbanisation represents at once – a major driver of, and an area vulnerable to – each of these. Urban development is, without a doubt, one of the priority ‘sectors’ (to use UNESCO’s own language (2014: 33)) where education and sustainability must ‘align’ with some urgency to ensure a transition to more sustainable cities (UN Habitat, 2014a). The Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in New York in September 2015, include two objectives central to this discussion (UNGA, 2015: 17 and 22): (Goal 4) ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’, which includes an aspiration that by 2030 ‘all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development’; and (Goal 11) ‘Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’.

Together, studies relating to urbanism, architecture, urban design, urban planning and urban geography, account for the interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral field of ‘urban studies education’ (USE) explored in this paper. Within this array of disciplines and perspectives, urban planning enjoys particular prominence, but has also been criticized for failing to integrate design, investigation and communication (Müller et al., 2005). Whereas the design focus stems from the beginning of the 20th century with utopias such as the ‘radiant city’ promoted by Le Corbusier, the establishment of the urban planning approach in the 1960s builds on the idea of a city with a focus on the human being and social contacts at the neighbourhood scale (e.g. Jane Jacobs). Strategic planning (i.e. investigating) is introduced to incorporate the dynamics of urban systems (e.g. Albrechts, 2012), which are largely absent in the design approach (Müller et al., 2005). Finally, the issue of communication gains prominence and introduces concepts such as ‘participatory planning’ and ‘co-production’ (e.g. Healey, 1993 on ‘the communicative turn’; Albrechts, 2012) for a more communicative and inclusive planning process. Thus, we refer to USE as a wide umbrella-type label that captures the three dimensions of design, investigation and communication, and reflects the complexity of ‘urban studies’, combining a spatial (e.g. architecture, urban design and landscape planning) and a social sciences perspective (e.g. urban economics, urban ecology and sociology).

USE has evolved to encompass many different academic backgrounds and there have been several initiatives to define a set of common values and principles to guide scholarship and practice, mostly coming from the field of planning. In its 1995 statement, for example, the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) emphasised that planning education must involve:

the scientific study of and training in creative conceptual and practical thinking on the relation between society and environment at various territorial levels and in the search, development and advancement of opportunities for purposeful intervention in that relation to ensure sustainable development (AESOP, 1995).

More recently (Geppert and Cotella, 2010), the Global Planning Education Association Network (GPEAN)¹ has ascertained that planning is characterized by a diversity of foci and curriculum contents rooted in cultural, planning and education traditions, and built upon geographically specific approaches. These initiatives and statements acknowledge the inherent complexity and *contested* nature of urban studies and planning education, and challenge the idea of a single model of planning education. However, all cities are subject to the effects of globalized markets, structural economic change and the impacts of climate change (EC-DGRP, 2009), as well as scarcity of resources, environmental justice and social equity, and the growing complexity of social, institutional and spatial mechanisms in a globalized society. Thus, the importance of the local context in USE must be balanced with the need to respond to challenges that are “increasingly becoming shared rather than unique” (UN Habitat, 2009: 196) thanks to globalization and rapid urbanisation. UN Habitat (2009) notes that many urban studies programmes have moved from geographically specific approaches to more integrated one-world approaches, bringing sustainability to the forefront of urban studies concerns.

Overall the picture is mixed. Despite progress in conceptualising and practising new forms of USE more capable of promoting sustainable forms of urban development, major challenges remain. Again, according to UN Habitat (2009), curriculum reform towards sustainability (i.e. its ‘embedding’ called for by UNESCO) was still missing in many schools in 2009, and where progress is noted, major gaps remain to be filled: there are schools that teach the technical and analytical aspects of planning but do not incorporate the design and policy approaches, others that do not include the participatory component and others still which do not effectively integrate issues of sustainability, globalisation, social equity or climate change. In summary, the UN decade for sustainable development education has come and gone, leaving much still to be accomplished: ‘the global transformation of higher education towards sustainable development has yet to occur’ (UNESCO, 2014: 31).

As part of a study on urbanisation trends in Europe and China (URBACHINA, see: <http://www.urbachina.eu>), this inquiry aims to examine how selected post-graduate top-level programmes in urban studies are adapting their curricula to the notion and requirements of sustainable urban development (SUD), as defined in the following section. We wish to understand to what extent sustainable development notions are embedded in these programmes in terms of overall aims, programme orientation, the skills taught, and topics within their core and elective courses. In this paper we: (1) review an extensive literature to identify the principles and practices characterising the UN decade (DESD), and to determine the themes, concepts, and trends shaping the promotion of SUD; (2) identify the topics and themes considered essential for teaching aimed at the promotion of SUD; (3) explore progress towards urban studies education for SUD within 25 top programmes worldwide; and (4) identify including important differences, persistent challenges, and possible ways forward, to advance higher education for

¹ AESOP is one of the 9 planning schools’ associations that currently form the GPEAN (check: http://www.aesop-planning.eu/en_GB/gpean).

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