

DEVELOPING CROSS-NATIONAL LEARNING FOR SPATIAL PLANNING: THE CASE OF DUNDEE'S OVERSEAS STUDY VISIT

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Context: cross-national study in spatial planning

The value of cross-national spatial planning teaching has long been acknowledged. As Booth (1986) suggests, there are several reasons for this. First, a broader understanding of the parameters of spatial planning is invaluable: what is it about, and what are its limits? Cross-national study can enable students to challenge their assumptions of the 'proper' concerns and limits of spatial planning, since spatial planning, both as a discipline and an administrative activity, 'has a curiously chameleon-like quality whose colours depend intimately on the particular social, political and cultural context in which it is found' (Booth, 1986, 1).

Second, cross-national study can provide a valuable counterweight to an attitude of insularity which may derive from the way many formal planning systems, institutions and legislative mechanisms have been transferred from the UK to other contexts. Such insularity is becoming more harmful as systems evolve and develop, and many comparative studies of planning systems have indicated that the relative strengths and weaknesses of spatial planning systems may be counter-intuitive (see for instance European Commission, 1997; Alterman, 2001). For instance, notwithstanding the high profile of the systems and institutions of spatial planning and associated public policy in the Netherlands, some observers highlight deficiencies such as lack of explicit public involvement and over-confidence in the formal working of local government (North and de Zeeuw, 2002).

Third, there is clearly a benefit in learning how spatial planning systems, institutions and practice might be improved by reference to practice in other countries. Indeed, 'policy transfer' has become a common means by which policy makers seek to increase policy effectiveness, involving for instance notions of bench-marking and policy competition (De Jong and De Vries, 2002). Again, however, fundamental problems arise from differences in context. The solution would seem to be to avoid the uncritical application of policy transfer, or the simple application in one context of an initiative, policy, system or mechanism that has been shown to be effective in another: what Hambleton and Taylor (1993) call transfer by anecdote rather than analysis, where differences in context – social, historical, cultural and political – may not be taken into account. Hence Wolman (1992) suggests that the success of policy transfer will depend directly on three factors, namely (a) the similarity of the problem in each context; (b) the success of the policy; and (c) the

similarity of the policy setting. In addition, Sutcliffe (1986) points to the need for comparative study within spatial planning and public policy, to act as a stimulus to innovation rather than mere transfer, again implying the need for close engagement with, and understanding of, context.

On a broader level, this third reason is related to the risk – applicable equally to research and teaching in comparative aspects of spatial planning – of ethnocentrism (Wilson, 1983). This arises largely because of the confusion between knowledge of, and evaluation of, institutions and practices in other countries. As Cropper (1986) suggests: ‘The values and beliefs (derived in part from the peculiar conceptual structuring of the world) of the local culture are used to evaluate the workings of other cultures. These values may frequently be inappropriate as criteria and evaluations may, as a result, be unfavourable. ... [Hence] ... care must be taken in comparative evaluation to ensure that comparisons are not inappropriate, mistaken or spurious. While knowledge and evaluation are closely related, methodologically, the two may be kept distinct.’ (69.)

The problem: embedding overseas fieldwork within learning programmes for spatial planning

The study visit to an overseas context has come to be an established part of undergraduate teaching in the discipline of spatial planning. Essentially, as in related disciplines such as geography, fieldwork is perceived as a pedagogic device that enables experiential learning by means of active engagement with the external world, providing a link between theory in spatial planning and the application of policy in practice.

Study visits for spatial planning are usually allied to modules relating to comparative aspects of planning. Such modules often focus particularly on EU-member states, and may also consider the increasing influence of the EU institutions on spatial planning activity. It is interesting to note Williams’ (1986) survey of teaching practice in the 1980s which showed the increasing use of lecture courses on comparative aspects of spatial planning, designed to underpin and enhance the value of overseas fieldwork, with choice of location for fieldtrips largely relating to the country’s reputation for planning. The Netherlands was the most popular choice on this basis, though other factors included institutional links, personal academic contacts, twin cities, climate, language and costs (Williams, 1986). Overall, he shows a trend for greater emphasis to be put on the rationale for overseas study visits, with an increasing recognition of the need for such visits to be conceptually linked with associated teaching (and research).

Hence there are clear aspects of continuity in the design and use of overseas study visits between the 1980s and the present. Moreover, the Royal Town Planning Institute’s current guidance for planning courses states that an element of core knowledge for all RTPI-accredited courses relates to ‘comparison with other countries eg the UK and EU spatial policy, planning and environmental policy and legislation’ (RTPI, 2001, 15). Moreover, while

the RTPI requests that planning courses within the UK and Ireland should focus on aspects of law and practice within the UK/EU context, it also states that 'in all cases the Institute will be looking for the study of planning law and practice to be set in a comparative context' RTPI, 2001, 16).

The issue, however, is how such overseas study visits can be positioned within the academic context so as to maximise learning outcomes.

The fieldwork programme: innovation and implementation

Background

An interesting perspective is provided by Wilson (1986) who was closely involved in the inception, organisation and delivery of Dundee's overseas study visit for spatial planning in the 1980s. At that time, the focus was on France, while now it is on the Netherlands. In terms of orientation, organisation and structure, however, there are several points of continuity. For instance, the teaching module that underpins the study visit and associated fieldwork is a compulsory element of the course, and teaching seeks, then as now, to allow students to identify, and understand the reasons for, similarities and differences between the countries studied and the UK. Moreover, preparatory lectures continue to provide the grounding on which students can frame the questions they ask while on the study visit, to enable them to complete a programme of assessed work when they return.

The main differences in practice between the 1980s and the present, relate to the area chosen and the rationale for this. Wilson shows that in the 1980s the reasons for the choice of France related to her own research contacts and the need for continuity, since France had been the chosen location for the study visit for nine years at that time (Wilson, 1986). At present, the rationale relates to several factors: a long-standing SOCRATES link with the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands; the continuing high value placed internationally on the approach, system, institutions and mechanisms of Dutch spatial planning (Davies, 1988; Priemus, 1996), as well as on aspects of academic theory originating in the Netherlands, such as the work of Professor Andreas Faludi at the University of Nijmegen; research conducted by the author (McCarthy, 1996; 1998a; 1998b; 1999). The need for continuity is also important, since the Netherlands has been the focus of most overseas study visits in the School since 1986.

Current practice

Dundee's overseas study visit programme is embedded within the *European Spatial Planning 3B: Comparative Practice* module, part of the 3rd year of the MA Programme in Town and Regional Planning. The content of this Module covers selected aspects of spatial planning policy and practice in other contexts (mainly EU member states), with the parallel module *European Spatial Planning 3A: Comparative Practice* considering the EU's institutional role in spatial planning. The taught lecture component of both these courses

is delivered partly before and partly after the study visit. Assessment for the *European Spatial Planning 3B: Comparative Practice* module is split between sessional examinations (60% of the mark) and coursework (providing 40% of the mark). The student group is typically 20-30 in number, and the module forms part of the third year of the MA degree programme in Town and Regional Planning.

Project work

The practical project element of the *European Spatial Planning 3B: Comparative Practice* module is designed to allow groups to focus on a theme of their own choosing; to apply research and analysis skills in collecting and evaluating information prior to the study visit; to test assumptions by further investigation on the visit itself (including the questioning of relevant practitioners and academics); and to apply comparative analysis to the final presentation in which students compare their chosen planning issue or theme in the Netherlands with the analogous situation in the UK. During the study visit, students are required to collect evidence to form the basis for group oral presentations on their return. The theme and topic of the presentation is determined by each group, but must be approved by tutors. The presentations from academics and practitioners during the visit provide an opportunity for students to test their assumptions and propositions, and time spent in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Nijmegen provides the opportunity for students to experience the results of spatial planning policy and record evidence in the form of photographs, video etc.

The intention is to avoid problems which can arise within such practical project work, for instance by applying a superficial and mechanistic approach to the relationship between theory and practice (Ramsden, 1992). Instead, the flexibility and orientation of the project is intended to ensure maximum scope for students to engage with content, so as to promote 'deep' as opposed to 'surface' learning. The positioning of the visit in the third year of the degree programme also facilitates such an approach, since it enables integration with previous knowledge, together with a critical approach concomitant with this level.

External contributions

The input provided by colleagues based at the University of Nijmegen consists of an introduction that sets out the geographical and social contextual factors relating to the immediate locality of Nijmegen, as well as the spatial policy context. This forms the basis for a guided bus tour of the area, again led by Nijmegen staff, which typically incorporates short walking tours of spatial planning sites of interest. In addition to such academic inputs, there are also practitioner inputs from the Ministry of Housing and the Environment in The Hague (in relation to national spatial planning) and from the Municipality of The Hague (in relation to the 'New Project')

for the regeneration of part of the city). Finally, practitioners from the city Municipality in Rotterdam provide a presentation on the development of the Kop van Zuid regeneration project, followed by a walking tour of this area.

Evaluation

Student feedback over seven years has indicated that the study visit is perceived as a valuable part of the learning programme. Moreover, the study visit, as part of a core module in the Part 3 MA Programme, is monitored annually in terms of student feedback by means of questionnaires, and its effectiveness in achieving pre-established learning outcomes is assessed formally on this basis. This allows for modification of the study visit programme where appropriate, as well as consistency and integration with other components of the MA programme.

Resource implications

The economic viability of the study visit is made possible by a student contribution covering around 65% of the cost. While this proportion has increased, the absolute cost is around £325 per student, which compares favourably with comparable study visits in other disciplines. Moreover, the visit includes travel to and from Dundee, so additional costs for students are minimised.

SENDA

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) (SENDA) came into force in September 2002. It introduces the right for students with disabilities not to be discriminated against in education, and it covers student services such as fieldtrips, as well as examinations and assessments and use of libraries and learning resources. The attempt has always been made as part of Dundee's study visit to ensure that practice is inclusive and that no student is either precluded from attending, or otherwise disadvantaged on the visit, as a result of any acknowledged disability. It is now necessary to plan pro-actively in future visits to ensure that circumstances can be arranged to ensure inclusiveness should the need arise. Certainly, those students who have been unable to attend because of approved domestic, financial, medical or other circumstances have been supported in the use of alternative means of learning and assessment, though it is important to work towards full participation. It is recognised that this can impact on all aspects of the study visit such as choice of accommodation, visit locations, and mode of travel.

Lessons learned

Several lessons have been learned from previous features of the visit that did not work effectively. For instance, over time, the proportion of time spent in formal presentations and walking tours etc. has increased in response to increased availability of productive contacts, as well as student preferences. In addition, the visit has moved from being single-centred (in Nijmegen) to

dual-centred (in Amsterdam and Nijmegen); this is because of student requests to minimise travelling time to and from sites of interest.

Conclusions

The value of an overseas study visit in the discipline area of spatial planning seems clear, though such visits – and associated courses covering comparative aspects of spatial planning, either within the EU or elsewhere – are fraught with problems such as risk of ethnocentrism. Nevertheless, the benefits seems to outweigh the risks, and the Royal Town Planning Institute, which regulates and accredits all planning courses in the UK, requires such a component within planning courses.

However, a number of conclusions and implications for other departments seeking to organise or change similar activities would seem to arise from Dundee's experience of the overseas study visit for spatial planning. In particular, the following may be suggested:

1. The planning and organisation of effective study visits is resource intensive, even where there is continuity as to location. While agents may be used to develop the basic accommodation and travel programme, administrative support is still essential to facilitate the detailed development of the visit programme. Financial support may also be necessary to minimise overall costs to students.
2. There are clear benefits to continuity over time, in terms of contacts, information provision prior to the visit, and logistical arrangements such as accommodation and travel. In addition of course, it can engender goodwill on the part of contacts, which is critical to ensuring an effective study visit.
3. Some underpinning by means of a formal link with an overseas academic institution is valuable, even where ample contacts exist with planning practitioners and policy-makers. This is because of the value of content that takes an overview of an academic and critical orientation, but that is nevertheless grounded in local experience. This helps put into perspective more partial orientations arising from practitioners and policy makers, which, while adding to knowledge of good practice, may lack a critical perspective. The availability of assistance from such contacts is increasingly restricted by work pressures, but this may be overcome by the possibility of reciprocation (for instance with parallel offers of assistance on study visits to the UK), or by the use of existing or new links such as research collaborations or SOCRATES exchange links.
4. Overall, the value of the overseas visit derives in large part from the way it can engender a rounded appreciation of how context affects planning practice. Hence it seems to be essential to experience – by a visit – the country in order to fully understand

the way that geographical, social, economic, administrative, historic and cultural factors all play a part in shaping planning institutions, policy and practice.

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