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Expectations and realities: an exploration in teaching planning ethics to university students

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Conference Abstract

3. Expectations and realities: An exploration in teaching planning ethics to university students.

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Upon graduation, planning students move into a diverse world, ranging from development assessment to policy development and public consultation. Furthermore, students are often thrust into a darker reality of balancing conflicting interests, power struggles and the search for the multi-layered and contentious 'public interest' (Tait, 2011). When entering the 'real world' of planning practice, the need for students to be adequately prepared for a range of challenges – practical, professional and ethical – is vital (Gurran et al., 2008; Nagy, 2012). This paper presents a preliminary theoretical discussion of current state of planning ethics at tertiary, or university, level and its role in the development of the ethically aware, practising planner. It considers the role of neoliberalism in academia, stressing both the teachers' and students' roles in understanding the highly political nature of the planning environment. Two case studies – the University of South Australia (UniSA), Australia and the University of Auckland, New Zealand are investigated. Finally, the paper provides a short overview of the need for ethics education in the current environment and its role in developing the ethically sensitive student. This includes discussion of 'job preparedness/employability', 'approachability of teachers and education', 'approachability of moral philosophy' and 'the importance of self-reflexivity/reflection and positionality'. This desk-top analysis provides a valuable insight into the current state of planning ethics education at two intercontinental universities. In understanding the differences and similarities between these courses, one can begin to appreciate how the nature of assessments, assigned readings and teaching staff contribute to developing the ethically aware professional planner. Both the University of South Australia and the University of Auckland ethics courses enable students to not only begin to understand their role as part of the greater collective of planning and society, but also towards being increasingly self-aware in their own decision-making skills.

Expectations and realities: An exploration in teaching planning ethics to university students

Keywords: *Ethics planning, planning education, universities; accreditation*

Introduction

In 1993, American planning academic Jerome L. Kaufman wrote of his experiences teaching planning ethics at university over a period of 12 years. During this time (from the 1970s onwards), planning ethics was viewed as a minor topic – an 'add on' to the university planning course; 'lack(ing)

definition and depth', with planning educators giving the topic 'scant attention' (Kaufman, 1993, p.107). Kaufman, in this work, and driven by other research with Elizabeth Howe (see Howe and Kaufman, 1979; Kaufman, 1981) ultimately stressed the need for university planning courses to include comprehensive ethics education. This topic would be designed to help students understand basic moral philosophy and theory that they could then apply within their future professional lives. In providing this information in an informative, practical and interactive manner, Kaufman (1993) hoped that interest in ethics would appeal to a younger generation of planners, and that universities would incorporate this fledgling field in their own planning courses. This paper therefore seeks to provide a brief overview of ethics courses at two separate universities, and how this often difficult and sometimes dry issue is presented to their respective students.

Twenty years later, planning ethics is now recognised as an integral part of the planning profession (Hendler, 1995; Campbell, 2012; Thomas, 2012). A plethora of works, including the role of ethics in professional practice (Campbell, 2012; Hendler, 1990), moral responsibility in planning (Gunder and Hillier, 2007) and the consideration of what constitutes 'ethical' behaviour in planning (Booth 2009) are evident in contemporary planning literature. This research, as well as increasing interest in the discipline, confirms Kaufman's (1993) own predictions that ethics would become increasingly prominent in planning practice, and subsequently, education. Further proof of the importance credited to ethics education and observance is through the development of professional institutions' planning codes and policy, stipulating 'correct' professional practice or 'ethical behaviour' (See for example, the Planning Institute of Australia's (PIA) *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct* (2002), the New Zealand Planning Institute's (NZPI) *Constitution (Section 8:Code of Ethics)* (2011) and the Royal Town Planning Institute's (RTPI) *Code of Professional Conduct* (2012). Ultimately, the drive by professional institutions and employers towards the ethically aware, culturally sensitive and responsible planner is becoming increasingly recognised and desired in contemporary society (Sandercock, 2003; Booth, 2009; March et al., 2012).

This paper explores the current state of planning ethics education at tertiary, or university, level and its role in the development of the ethically aware, practising planner. Much has been discussed about planning education in general (Gurran et al., 2008; Whitzman, 2009; Freestone et al., 2007; Freestone et al., 2006), but less on planning ethics education specifically. (Some examples include Nagy, 2012 and Thomas, 2012). As many planners face ethical dilemmas in their working lives, it is important to understand how students are prepared, through their education, for these potential challenges. This paper therefore provides valuable insight into how two universities conduct specific ethics topics, with comparison providing potentially shedding new light on how teaching staff can alternatively educate students in such a value-laden area.

In understanding the nature of current planning ethics education, the role of the university in modern day is briefly discussed. This highlights how many university courses globally, are driven towards the need to cater for 'job ready' individuals. Job-preparedness also is of paramount importance, as stipulated by professional planning bodies. Two case studies from within Australia and New Zealand have been selected for analysis. The selection of these case studies was based upon a Commonwealth Association of Planners' (CAP) Accreditation Report, published in 2011, which recognised that of the 105 universities in 18 selected Commonwealth countries, only seven of these countries: the UK, Australia, Nigeria, Canada, New Zealand, Malaysia and South Africa have professionally accredited courses. The planning institutes of the UK, Canada and Australia "offer mutual recognition of each other's qualifications", with some recognition of New Zealand's courses between these countries (Commonwealth Association of Planners, 2011, p.2). A

comparative desk-top study of each nation's planning courses, and ethics topic – a general requirement for undergraduate planning courses within the CAP - was also conducted. Course co-ordinators of these topics, from the two countries were also contacted via email, for individual comment.

The role of universities and planning in a neoliberal world: a short introduction

As expectations of higher education planning courses changed over time, so too has the role attributed to that of the university. Since the 1980s, the effects of neoliberalism upon the global economy have filtered through to universities (and other teaching institutions of the developed world), resulting in extensive socio-economic impacts upon these organisations (Shore, 2010; Williams, 2008; Olssen and Peters, 2005). Predominantly there has been a rise in the highly debated “global knowledge economy”; an effect which emphasises the economic potential of “knowledge”; or “the application and productive use of information” (Roberts, 2009, p.287). Shore (2010, p.15) argues that this paradigm consists of two major trends which impact directly upon universities. First, the “dramatic rise in student numbers’ attending universities in recent years”, (or “massification”), is coupled with a large decline in government funding per individual student. Second, a shift of emphasis within the role of universities, from that of a bastion of intellect and critical engagement, to an economic corporation, competing with other institutions and businesses for government and public funding. Ultimately, universities themselves are now no longer seen as providing for the ‘public good’ by educating the broader, general populace, but as an “individual economic investment” (Shore, 2010, p.15).

But what effect do these global economic impacts and the restructuring of university priorities have on the discipline of planning, and more specifically planning ethics education? The discipline of planning has evolved, often being shaped by the current economic climate and/or market (NZPI, 2011, p. 5). Certainly, the neoliberal agenda has had extensive ramifications upon planning practice (Campbell and Marshall, 1999; Cook and Sarkissian, 2000). The role and image of planning has had to grow and adapt, from that of apolitical, “technocratic determinism to philosophical indeterminism” (Connell, 2010, p.269). These changing expectations of the profession, highlights the continuing tension between the professional and personal values of the modern day planner (Sager 2009). Planning education, much like other social sciences, has therefore developed from a strict Modernity focus to reflexive Modernity, impacted by globalisation (Bosman et al., 2011, p.73). Because of a combination of these factors, university planning courses have had increasing demands placed upon them to produce work-ready, professional individuals (Gurran et al., 2008; Thomas, 2012). Accordingly, many planning courses globally now adopt and value the importance of work placement schemes, aimed at preparing students for the realities of working in the field (Freestone et al., 2007; Gurran et al., 2008; PIA, 2011). It could be argued that some preparation in ethics might form a natural prerequisite for such work experience.

Planning codes and institutions

Planning schools, and the academics who work within these institutions, hold some accountability for the ethical behaviour of individuals who are part of them. The two case studies have national, peak professional planning bodies: Australia – the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA); and New Zealand – the New Zealand Planning Institute (NZPI). The bodies themselves act as figurehead organisations for professionals in the planning discipline (NZPI, 2013a), and promote ‘planning’ as a profession. Furthermore, these bodies provide ethical codes for moral guidance, specifically “pragmatic guides for

professionals” (Hendler, 1990, p.23). Hendler, herself, recognised the importance of professional codes in influencing practice, functioning as normative guides for stipulating professional behaviour (Thomas, 2012, p.401). The university environment is therefore seen as important, in promoting both ethical practice and the role of the professional bodies’ code of conduct (NZPI, 2011, p.7). For example, at the University of South Australia, PIA’s *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct* (2002) is often discussed in the undergraduate Bachelor of Urban and Regional Planning course. The Code is also heavily debated in the first few weeks of the “Planning and Professional Ethics” course in fourth year, with students considering its role and importance for the practising planner.

Planning expectations

“The one thing I have learnt during my few months in the working world, is that stress as a graduate planner is very different (from the stresses of university)” — Kylie Hall, New Zealand Planning Institute Young Planner Representative and graduate planner

As evidenced by planning professional bodies’ codes and policies, there is a general consensus among planning academics, employers and professional planning bodies that planning education must conform to certain criteria. Expectations and understanding of ethical behaviour are seen as an important facet of this education, and are developed in specialised ethics classes, work education opportunities and other topics. This paper therefore seeks to provide a brief overview of ethics courses at two separate universities, and how this often difficult and perhaps dry issue is presented to their respective students.

In 2008, the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) released a Planning Education Discussion Paper, as a means of ensuring that the then current PIA *Education Policy* met the continuing needs of the planning profession (PIA 2013a). Under one section of the report, the authors asked a range of stakeholders in the planning profession – academics; employees and students – what they considered as ‘important’ within the planning education process. The National Young Planners’ Group, responding for the ‘students’ and ‘graduates,’ noted that primarily, planning courses should cater for the student to be ‘job-ready’ (Gurran et al., 2008, p.21). Other topics considered important included: ‘planning history’, ‘social theory’ and ‘sustainability’. Issues surrounding ‘ethics’ or issues of similar inclination were not included in the extensive list. The closest issue was: “processes in assessing development proposals, from the perspective of both the Council or authority, and the applicant or developer, and *equipping students with the skills to deal with different stakeholder interests, political pressures and community involvement*” (Gurran et al., 2008, p.21. Emphasis added).

Considering the responses in this report and reflecting on current higher education discourse and professional criteria, the need for preparing the student to be ‘job ready’ appears vital for many university courses, not only planning (Bosman et al., 2011; Thomas, 2012). Universities therefore, appear at a crossroad – where, due to demands for public funding, students are being moulded into employable professionals for current practice, often at the expense of developing critically thinking, morally sensitive individuals (Thomas, 2012; Cook and Sarkissian, 2000; Bosman et al., 2011). Ultimately, many graduate planners are left struggling with the realities of professional practice (Bosman et al., 2011, p.78; Cook and Sarkissian, 2000), with PIA recognising ‘stress’ as the reason many planners quit the discipline within the first five years of practice (Gurran et al., 2008). Ethics topics at university could, therefore, be seen as a practical mechanism of merging theory and practice; helping students become more aware of challenges which may confront them in their professional lives.

For example, in 2012, the South Australian Young Planners (SAYP) held an interactive workshop discussing the ethical dilemmas and circumstances planners encounter regularly in their profession. Respected individuals within the discipline in South Australia, working within local councils, academia, private development companies and the State Government, presented on their beliefs of ethical practice in their own daily working lives. The undergraduate ethics class, provided by the University of South Australia, was recognised as the catalyst for this event, and presenters at the workshop recognised the importance of this topic in their own professional development. This workshop provided both current students of planning and professionals to openly discuss what they expected from planning practice and reflect upon how their own education may have provided them with these skills and attributes.

The university experience: a snapshot from Australia and New Zealand

This section considers how two case studies – the University of South Australia, Australia and the University of Auckland, New Zealand – introduce their planning courses, and specifically, planning ethics topics, to potential students on their webpages. Further information was collected from the appropriate national planning institutes, mostly relating to accreditation of specific planning courses. The accreditation process presents an accountable mechanism for understanding the university process. The two course co-ordinators of these topics were contacted to provide comment of their courses through person or via email. This desk-top study is the initial stages of what is a planned detailed investigation into student expectations and views on ethics planning courses primarily in Australia, but also internationally.

University Planning Schools

University of South Australia, Australia

In Australia, 16 universities are currently offering PIA current accredited planning courses at undergraduate level (PIA 2013b). PIA notes that their “course accreditation process establishes and maintains national standards for the educational attainments of entrants into the planning profession” (PIA 2013b). The current Australian accreditation policy was reviewed and subsequently updated in 2010, following a report recognising the need to alter practice (Gurran et al., 2008; March et al., 2012). The subsequent review has seen substantial alterations and improvements in the accreditation process and planning education in Australian universities. As part of being accredited, Australian planning courses conform to a rigid Accreditation Policy, which states that “Professionalism, Practice and Ethics” must be a core component of the program to get approval (PIA, 2011, p.10).

At the University of South Australia, “Planning and Professional Ethics” is taught in the fourth year of the Bachelor of Urban and Regional Planning course, after students have participated in a 60 day work practicum in their third year of study. The course itself is designed to prepare the students for day to day ethical concerns that they would encounter in their role as a planner. The practical nature of this course is highlighted through assessments and class readings. For example, the first assignment sees students analysing a planning appeal judgement passed by the Environmental Resource Development Court. This assessment is designed to allow students to understand their responsibilities as a professional planner as ‘an expert’ (2013, p.5). Specific emphasis is placed upon how the Court concludes the “appropriate role of a planning expert”, and students are asked to give their own opinions regarding the role of the expert witness.

Within the UniSA model, and similar to Kaufman's classes, students are encouraged to speak their mind and continually challenge their own epistemological views. This course endeavours to enable ethics to be a relatable and practical topic for students. A series of short practical exercise scenarios place students in ethically awkward situations and class discussions focus on resolving these. Recognising the expressed need for university students to be 'job ready', students also partake in a mock Environmental Resource Development (ERD) Court appeal overseen by an experienced Commissioner. Emphasis is placed on the appropriate ethical behaviour of the expert witness in an appeal situation. Students are assigned roles – such as: planning lawyer or various expert witnesses representing the applicant, council or other parties joined to the appeal – and enact a real-life ERD scenario – an experience many of these individuals will participate in in their professional career. The mock appeal is a popular, relevant and eye-opening learning experience, according to student course evaluations, with practical and valuable implications for their professional lives.

University of Auckland, New Zealand

In New Zealand, five universities currently offer accredited NZPI planning courses at an undergraduate level (NZPI 2013 and 2011). The *NZPI Education Policy and Accreditation Procedures 2011* governs the requirements for university accreditation, and is run in conjunction with participating universities. As part of this policy, planning courses must include 'planning thematic' courses, which includes: "*philosophy, policy, history, ethics, theory, and critical reflection of planning* to provide students an overview of the nature and purpose of planning; planning history; contemporary debates and trends; planning theory; and planning at different spatial scales" (NZPI, 2011, p. 9. Emphasis added.)

At the University of Auckland, the Bachelor of Planning (to be replaced by a Bachelor of Planning Honours in 2014), offers 'Planning Theories and Professional Practice' (University of Auckland 2013). This fourth year subject investigates "theoretical approaches concerning the nature, scope and purpose of planning(,) (p)rofessional practice in public and private agencies (and) (t)he roles and function of planners in society" (University of Auckland 2013). From email correspondence with Associate Professor Michael Gunder, course co-ordinator, this topic focuses upon "developing critical reflective skills and thinking" (Gunder, 2013, pers. comm.). These skills are demonstrated through the second assignment, where students are asked to maintain a reflective diary, commenting on their expectations of planning and where they see themselves within five years in the planning profession. Furthermore, students are provided with a strong theoretical content, engaging with works by Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Lacan. This also includes questioning the roles such issues as rationality, power, knowledge and desire in planning.

Discussion: expectations of ethics planning

This study has provided a brief overview of the ethics topics for two universities: The University of South Australia, Australia and The University of Auckland, New Zealand. It is acknowledged that the current global neoliberal agenda (among other factors) has seen the role and expectations of the university change; to that of providing 'job ready' individuals. Considering this, and the needs of professional planning institutions, the following discussion provides some guidelines/observations about the current state of ethics planning teaching (and planning in general). These include:

Job preparedness/employability

An important aspect of planning education, expected by academics, students and employers alike, is for graduates to be 'employable' (Gurran et al., 2008; Cook and Sarkissian, 2000; Thomas, 2012). This need is mirrored in the range of topics offered to students (such as the work placement component at UniSA and the range of 'Planning Studios' offered at the University of Auckland), and the criteria outlined by the profession. Ultimately, university courses are generally designed to provide a range of skills/balance between the theoretical and practical (Gurran et al., 2008). Even so, the emphasis upon the immediate 'job preparedness' of the student and fulfilling the needs of the industry can compromise student learning in the long run. These skills can include the development of "deeper levels of understanding and higher order intellectual and communicative attributes". (Gurran et al., 2008:23. See also: Cook and Sarkissian, 2000; Thomas, 2012; Freestone et al., 2007).

Ultimately, the ethics classes presented by both UniSA and the University of Auckland strongly demonstrate evidence of the attempt to prepare students for their professional planning careers. As well as assignments catered for 'real-life' planning ethical experiences (such as students contemplating their views on the planning profession through a reflective diary at the University of Auckland and the ERD Court trial at UniSA), students are also given opportunities to listen to practising planning professionals explaining about the ethical issues they have faced in their varying careers.

'Approachability' of teachers and education

A recent paradigm in education involves the importance of the student/teacher relationship in developing morally sensitive and understanding students (Thomas, 2012; Park, 2012). In Australia, planning educators have become increasingly responsive to reflexive planning practices. This involves increasingly high levels of student interaction in teaching (Bosman et al., 2011, p.78). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that practising planners recognise the importance of planning ethics education at university level (Cook and Sarkissian, 2000, p.19). Universities can aid in the development of students' moral sensibilities and understanding, through lectures, libraries and other elements (Thomas, 2012, p. 403). Certainly, considering Hendler's (1990) own work on the 'principled moral reflection', the importance of teacher-student and student-student interaction is exacerbated and needed (See also Thomas, 2012). The planning school environment subsequently nurtures the students' moral sensitivity and allows them to grow. The importance of the teacher in providing individualistic student help is therefore paramount, beyond the scope of classes (See Thomas, 2012).

Approachability of moral philosophy

From the case studies and literature, it is evident that the teaching of planning ethics requires a basic understanding of seminal philosophers, concepts and theories in moral philosophy (such as Socrates; Aristotle and Jeremy Bentham). Kaufman (1993, p.110) notes the need for the 'approachability' of moral philosophy, in order for these difficult, but important concepts/authors to be introduced to students. He suggests that teachers of planning ethics assign readings of authors who explain philosophers and their theories, rather the philosophers' works themselves. At UniSA, this model is seemingly followed, with weekly readings used to reflect relatable ethical dilemmas in planning practice. This is demonstrated in readings of works by Bent Flyvbjerg's (2002) and his reflections upon power, politics and planning in Aalborg, Denmark.

At the University of Auckland, the course guide demonstrates a strong theoretical emphasis, with one of the “Intended Learning Outcomes” to be able to “demonstrate knowledge and understanding of...international planning theorists and dominant planning theory narratives (and) the philosophical dimensions of ethical practice”. Gunder (2013, pers. comm.) confirms that the course is not just related to planning issues, but “all about ethics in the widest sense”. This is apparent in the range of theoretical issues covered throughout the course, including learning outcomes positioned to (for example) “develop an understanding of the scientific that underlies modern rationality” (Gunder, 2013, pers. comm.). Furthermore, Kaufman (1993) suggests the idea of ‘ethics games’ in class, using ethical scenarios which students can relate to and understand. This is evident with UniSA’s scenario exercises and mock ERD Court appeal.

The importance of self-reflexivity/reflection and positionality

This final observation could be considered one of the most important features in a planning ethics course. The two case studies highlight how these topics often cater for the recognition (or, at the very least, a development towards the understanding) of the student’s own epistemological standpoints. This includes how these views affect their own planning decisions and experiences. For example, at the University of Auckland, the course content appears to be positioned towards helping students understand their own role in the planning process. This is evident with the teaching of ‘phronesis’ learning (in Week 8) and power rationality (in Week 5). The student is also expected, as one of the “Key transferable skills” (under the course’s “Intended Learning outcomes”) to be able to “demonstrate a clear understanding of one’s ethical position” upon the completion of the ethics course. The assessment tasks, as well as correspondence with Gunder (2013) certainly demonstrate the emphasis upon this topic in helping students understand their role not only as part of the greater planning collective, but also as an individual planner.

At UniSA, students take part in a class task where they are presented with interpretations of planning practice which carry value and ethics implications. Presented with a variety of perspectives such as “Planning is an apolitical technical exercise” or “Planning is essentially about people” as well as scenarios where they are asked how they might act, for example “I would do nothing’ or “Legally I must do this despite not agreeing with it”, individual students align themselves with the statement which best represents their views. This is often an eye-opening task for students, as they are confronted with a wide range of responses from their peers, often forcing them to question and justify their own stance.

This recognition and perhaps, improvement in moral understanding is recognised in the literature (Thomas, 2012; Hendler, 1990; Kaufman, 1993). One means is through “principled moral reflection”, in which an individual “runs through (the) implications of ethical principles in relation to personal experience, other evidence and, often, the sense of her (sic) own moral identity and commitments”, often “usefully supported by guides such as parents and teachers” (Thomas, 2012, p.403-404). Ultimately, students are, and should be actively encouraged in a planning ethics course to reflect upon and reassess their own beliefs of what constitutes sound ethical planning practice, and indeed, their own views on morality. This is perhaps best encapsulated by a UniSA student, noting in their student evaluation survey, that the ethics topic “related to planning specifically but was transferable to life (making them) question where they stood on certain topics both morally and ethically”.

Conclusion

As recognised by Kaufman (1993), ethics is an important facet of a student's university planning education. As the roles of universities evolve to adapt to the current neoliberal paradigm, university courses, as well as planning courses globally, need to cater to the 'job-ready' professional. The two case studies have highlighted the different perspectives various universities adopt in their own planning ethics courses. The value in analysing and comparing different courses related to ethics planning is essential, as teaching staff and students alike have opportunities to learn from and adapt their own courses to reflect and best represent current educational discourse. This study has demonstrated that even though they are located within different countries, both the University of South Australia and the University of Auckland share strong common ideals in the teaching of their planning ethics courses. This relates to providing students the means to adequately address ethical dilemmas in their own careers, providing a strong theoretical basis in moral philosophy and enabling students to debate openly with teaching staff and invited guest lecturers. Perhaps most importantly, both universities highlight to students their role as an individual planner, as well as their position among the greater collective of the planning profession and society. These topics specifically encourage students to reflect on their own place in and views of society. Ultimately, it appears that even though these courses are specifically designed for ethical and moral development and situations suited for planning, many students recognise and appreciate the greater knowledge and personal insight these courses provide for life.

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