

Paper Title: Alumni experiences in Planning education and beyond – Making sense of the ideals of Equality/Equity

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Abstract:

Fundamentally, higher education spaces are sites of imagined promise. This promise of higher education works at multiple levels. For the current paper, we look at this promise at two levels – the promise that learners in these spaces buy into when they access higher education and the promise that these spaces hold for larger societal development. The world over these promises is particularly relevant to the fields that broadly fall into the space of ‘professional education’. In the current paper, we focus on Planning education, particularly. The study under which this paper is prepared was conducted under Work Package 5 of the KNOW project. The project led by University College London seeks to deliver transformative research and capacity-building for innovation in policy and planning to promote urban equality. Work Package 5 particularly looked at planning education, its multiple layers and the ways it intersected with the notion of equity, equality and the idea of a just city. The project examined these layers at the individual, institutional and networks levels. The current paper presents findings from the layer examining individual experiences. This layer of the study looked at the experiences of alumni of planning programmes at various universities across the global South. The sites of investigation included premier planning education departments in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Tanzania. The study relied primarily on comparative qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and followed the principles of narrative storytelling as a method. The value added to professional education, and its increased orientation to service the global economy, over time has increased in the neo-liberal era (Slaughter & Rhoads, 2000; Kamat, 2011). With this contested transition, the values inherent to higher education spaces have come into a state of tension - for instance, the values of critical pedagogy - leading to democratic practice, and social justice sometimes comes into conflict between the instrumental nature of professional higher education spaces where the emphasis is on ‘return on investment’ (Slaughter & Rhoads, 2000). If the imperatives of social justice and democratic practice are to hold, not only in educational places but also in professional environments, then the ways in which such education is consumed are important to understand. Further, workforce participation and the ways in which students transitioning from educational spaces into the world of work carry ‘values’; and the ways in which such values are engaged with or transformed in everyday professional practice is an important layer to uncover. Consumption of education in the higher education space is a result of complex interplays between site and person. The structural edifice of higher education and the world of work are sometimes aligned with people’s experiences and aspirations or, at other times, become sites of struggle. In such sites, there are multiple nodes of engagement where students’ and professionals’ experiences intersect with established structures and are shaped by them. In this paper, we particularly look at Discipline (Planning degrees and Planning work), Curriculum (in planning schools and their use in a professional environment) and Social dynamics and Identity (in educational and professional sites). At these intersections, an understanding of the ways in which participants make meaning and articulate their modes of practice (as students and professionals) offers important insights into the ways in which notions of equity/equality are engaged by students and alumni in urban/planning educational and professional spaces.

Discipline: Degrees/credentials, including planning degrees, that fall within the purview of what is understood as 'professional education' has gained a lot of currency in the neo-liberally inflected marketplace. An examination of students' and professionals' motivations to pursue and work in such disciplines and professions offers an insight into the values inherent to such credentials and careers.

Curriculum: Curriculums are inherently value-laden and curriculum design is a much-contested space (Ashwin, 2014; Land, Rattray & Vivian, 2014). Examining student experiences in engaging with such a curriculum is an important thread of inquiry as such engagement provides evidence of the ways in which values are delivered and consumed, and the various contestations in this interaction. Further, the ways in which such a curriculum informs actual practice is understood through the experiences of alumni.

Social dynamics and identity in the site of educational and professional practice: Educational and professional spaces are essentially figured worlds (Holland, et. al, 1998) where race, class, gender and ethnicity (and caste in the Indian context) can work as critical pivots on which the imagined figurative identity and the positional relational identity entangle, leading to a negotiated space of authoring and making of worlds. Such negotiations occurring in student and alumni experiences are important to unpack if we are to understand the positionalities from which they engage with 'values' (of equity/equality). As mentioned earlier, these intersecting structures influence the world of practice in the lives of learners who access higher education in Planning. Such access is also influenced by the imagined promise of such spaces in the lives of learners coming from wide-ranging backgrounds. This imagination is played out against the larger imaginary of what Planning education is meant to be in the narrative of City and Nation building. As the paper will show, the learners imagine their trajectories against a background of who is considered an ideal planner and the roles that their professional identity will play in City and Nation-building – particularly the values that emerge in these negotiated terrains. There is disjuncture in the ways in which both trajectories – the individual and the institutions, are imagined. Within this disjuncture, there are new and messy linearities that come into being, sometimes in opposition to imagined trajectories. The paper examines the ideals of access and attainability, ostensibly inherent to Planning higher education spaces, through the experiences of the individual learners navigating this space with their own sense of ideals and values that are not only shaped and reshaped by higher education spaces but are also shaped by the imagined ideals of the workforce that is called upon to shape Cities and Nations.
