

GLOBAL PLANNING EDUCATION ASSOCIATION NETWORK AN INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM OF RECOGNITION OF PLANNING SCHOOLS AND/OR STUDENTS:

MOTIVATION AND A WAY FORWARD

Background

The Global Planning Education Association Network (GPEAN), a nine member network representing planning schools in most parts of the world, discussed international credentialing of planning education at its 2003 annual meeting in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and decided to initiate a multi-year process of discussion on the issue. This document sets out a motivation for international credentialing and discusses some possible ways in which such a system could be established. Finally a programme of action for member planning school associations, intended to lead to possible actions on international credentialing, is laid out.

Motivation

Many countries and regions have their own systems of accrediting planning schools, but increasingly planning schools from various parts of the world are seeking accreditation by one of the main country-based accrediting bodies, the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and the US Planning Accreditation Board (PAB), in order to gain a degree of international recognition. Such requests can place accreditation bodies in a difficult position as the basis for evaluation is often unclear, contexts differ significantly, and applicant schools are faced with the heavy cost of travel and subsistence for the accrediting team. These requests are occurring, on the one hand, as a result of the increasing international mobility of planning graduates who wish to work in various parts of the world; and on the other hand, as a result of the lack of accreditation systems in certain countries where planning schools nonetheless see the value of accreditation both to themselves and their students.

Some system of international consultation and/or evaluation could help to improve the quality of planning education in those parts of the world where no system of accreditation is currently in place, and would offer important quality assurance to potential employers of planning graduates in all parts of the world. Such a system could be preferable to the present ad hoc one, which in any event may perpetuate a one-way relationship between 'first world' accrediting bodies and planners from elsewhere, and perhaps bias planning education towards the concerns of countries in the North. International consultation and/or evaluation would offer the

opportunity to consider criteria for planning education from a truly international and multi-cultural perspective.

It is also of significance that other related professions, such as engineering, have taken the decision to establish an international accreditation system. It appears to be an issue that planners will have to confront at some stage.

Possible approaches to international consultation and/or evaluation

There are many possible “models” of international consultation and/or evaluation. Among these are:

- bullet Some form of international accreditation based on international (or regional) criteria and employing visits to schools/departments by an international team. A key issue here is how the cost of travel and subsistence is funded, particularly in poorer countries.

- bullet International determinations of Substantial Equivalency undertaken by one or more existing accrediting organizations.

- bullet Curriculum-wide international (or regional) consultation leading to advice to be considered by institutions under review. This might include site visits.

- bullet International approval of certain specific ‘conversion’ courses (referring to a unit of instruction and not a full programme leading to a degree), offered to planning graduates and examined at a particular centre within a country. The RTPi is currently considering this option for commonwealth countries. The RTPi would approve the content and examination of two courses offered locally to planning graduates, would require two years of structured practical experience (in their local context), and would subject the applicant to an Assessment of Professional Competence. This approach could offer a model to be followed by an international accrediting agency.

- bullet Development of distance learning methodologies to deliver course content electronically to applicants and to conduct an examination in their home countries. Such content would have to be developed in discussions with local associations and existing accreditation bodies.

Any system of international accreditation would have to be sensitive to the vast differences in resources and contexts across the globe, along with possible fears by planning schools in poorer countries that they would be subjected to unachievable ‘first world’ standards. Key issues for planners and planning educators in countries of the South are very different to those in the North, and this understanding would need to be accommodated in the establishment of performance criteria. Resource constraints and inequalities also mean that an accreditation programme would need to be accompanied by a developmental programme which offered guidance (and possibly practical help and resources) to planning schools seeking accreditation. Without this, the divide between better-off planning schools able to secure accreditation and those unable to do so, would simply increase.

The way forward

The full support of the existing country-based accreditation bodies (and particularly the RTPI and PAB), which have a wealth of experience in accreditation matters, is crucial to this initiative. Also crucial is support from planning schools and their associations – both from those countries with accreditation systems and those without. But first thorough consultation needs to take place around the form of an international capacity and the various models of consultation.

It is suggested here that GPEAN could play a role in initiating discussion on this issue, first within planning school associations, and then in conjunction with existing accrediting bodies. Both the RTPI and the Commonwealth Association of Planners have given some thought to the question of accreditation of schools outside of the UK, and this will provide a useful input to the debate. As a practical first step it is suggested that future planning school congresses arrange panel discussions on the issue of international evaluation and consultation, and invite speakers from existing professional and accrediting bodies to contribute to these. GPEAN representatives would be asked to feed back on these debates to the GPEAN co-ordinating committee, which could act as a point of co-ordination and dissemination for these debates. The next World Planning Schools Congress in 2006 would provide a good opportunity to assess the extent to which consensus has emerged on this issue.

This document is therefore being sent to planning school association representatives on GPEAN, with a request to raise the issue where appropriate in your association, and to put forward proposals for panel discussions in up-coming congresses.

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August, 2003