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To cite this article: Neale Blair & Mtafu Manda (2016) A partnership-based model for embedding employability in urban planning education, *Urban, Planning and Transport Research*, 4:1, 46-63, DOI: [10.1080/21650020.2016.1145070](https://doi.org/10.1080/21650020.2016.1145070)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21650020.2016.1145070>



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Published online: 25 Feb 2016.



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A partnership-based model for embedding employability in urban planning education

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a partnership-based model for embedding employability in urban planning education. The model is based on the author's experiences of implementing an international project which supported the development of employability skills in urban and regional planning education in Malawi. Since independence, urban planners have typically trained outside the country, attending university in the UK and other Commonwealth countries. More recently, the paradigm has shifted towards in-country education delivered by academic staff cognisant with the opportunities and challenges of development in Malawi. There remains, though, a gap between graduate knowledge of the subject and the skills necessary to pursue a professional career in the sector. Although there is no consensus yet on the meaning of employability in the literature, lessons from the project indicate that academic–public–private collaboration helps incorporate in curriculum skills that employers anticipate. Applicability of these principles is however context dependent, particularly in the emerging economy context where institutional capacity may be less developed compared to elsewhere.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 January 2016
Accepted 19 January 2016

KEYWORDS

Urban planning;
employability; partnership;
emerging economy;
curriculum design

1. Introduction

Graduate employability is the subject of ongoing discussion across the world, spanning disciplinary boundaries to include both 'vocational' and 'non-vocational' degree courses (Little, 2003). Employability variously refers to the skills an individual possesses that will result in: securing a job and proceeding along a career pathway (Yorke & Knight, 2006); an individual's performance in the workplace (Confederation of British Industry [CBI], 2007); and satisfactory occupational choice (Pool & Sewell, 2007). It is therefore reasonable to expect that students embarking on a spatial planning or cognate degree will develop the knowledge and practical skills necessary for a career in the profession. The nature of these skills and the style of delivery within the curriculum may be further informed by the learning outcomes stipulated by a professional or regulatory body, though this is not

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always the case (Frank et al., 2014). Some accrediting institutions, including the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), have embraced the employability skills concept, which is set at the core of the educational experience (see: RTPI, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to share a model we have developed for embedding employability skills within initial planning education courses.

The global employment outlook for planning graduates is mixed. Recent planning reforms across Europe have resulted in changed power-relations and inter-dependency amongst stakeholders involved with planning (Reimer, Getimis, & Blotevogel, 2014); yet, the multi-actor involvement paradigm does not necessarily translate into ubiquitous opportunities for planning graduates. Indeed, in countries like the UK, the ‘perceived capability of planning’ is eroding, with other sectors competing for specialist planning functions (McCarthy & Bagaee, 2014, p. 3). Whilst it is not possible for planning educators to guarantee prospective students a job in the profession, academic institutions are charged with putting in place support measures that will assist planning graduates into employment (McLoughlin, 2012, p. 9). Indeed, although employment markets are susceptible to prevailing political and economic conditions, planning remains a mobile profession. Workers are moving between the global North and South, and especially between the developed countries of the Commonwealth (RTPI, 2014). This potentially enables the sharing of ‘good practice’, but practitioners must also be aware that approaches to, and rationalities of, planning learned during initial university education may not be applicable in their new operating context, particularly as assumptions based in the global North do not hold elsewhere in the world (Watson, 2009, p. 2272).

The case for incorporating employability amongst the range of skills developed through planning education is convincing, a win-win for academia – particularly in showcasing a course amongst prospective students – and for graduates who wish to follow a career in the sector. The literature (Section 2) typically explores the *function* and *form* of employability skills, such as communication. There is some explanation of curriculum development (see, for example: Dowling & Ruming, 2013), but the literature is generally weak on the practical steps of *how* to embed employability within the curriculum. Focusing on Malawi, this paper presents a new model for employability skills development based on a collaborative public-private-academia partnership that adds value to planning education and practice by underpinning specialist elements of the curriculum. Malawi is an especially interesting laboratory to locate this model as planning graduates have historically encountered two significant barriers to securing employment, requiring the type of academic assistance advocated above. First, recognition of the specialist skills required of the planner practitioner, with non-cognate graduates employed into professional planning positions; second, delayed local government reform, now implemented and precipitating new employment opportunities (Manda, 2013).

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we explore the concept of employability within academic literature generally, and planning education research particularly. Section 3 explains the planning context of Malawi. Section 4 tracks the evolution of employability as a skills-based concept in Malawi planning education and the underpinning pedagogy that emerged from a recent British Council/DEL¹-funded research project. Section 5 explains the model for academic-public-private partnership in planning education. We conclude the paper with reflections on the implementation of our model, which is applicable internationally and transferable across other disciplines.

2. Literature review

This section is in two parts. First, some of the contemporary debates at the nexus between planning practice and education are reviewed to establish a rationale for reorienting planning curricula towards employability. Second, and following the brief introduction earlier, the concept of employability is scoped in more detail.

2.1. Educating future planning professionals

The discipline of planning is in a constant state of flux, swayed by market forces and changing societal expectations and altered power-relations in the postmodern context (Davoudi, 2012; Gospodini & Skayannis, 2005). Planning has been under pressure to demonstrate its relevance, particularly amongst the communities impacted by planning decisions (Ozawa & Seltzer, 1999). Recent research, for example Adams and Watkins (2014), has reasserted that planning is central to social, environmental and economic well-being. Based on the latter, planners are encouraged to embrace a worldview of the profession that may well be at odds to what was learned and honed during their initial education:

What is needed is not for planners to become market actors, but rather to recognise that they are already market actors, intricately involved in market shaping and stimulus as well as regulation. As a result, planners need to develop their capacity and confidence to act accordingly.... (ibid., p. 2)

Elsewhere, and complementary to this definition, planners are understood as ‘agents of change’ (Vigar, 2012) deploying key tools such as mediation and negotiation with stakeholders to achieve change. Whether it is as ‘market actors’ or ‘agents of change’, navigating the diversity of specialisms allied to the profession can be overwhelming, although in another regard this can be considered the strength of planning (Forsyth, 2012, p. 167). Regardless of their final position, practitioners need ‘educational and professional development support from both the academic and professional communities to enter and advance their careers’ (Dalton, 2007, p. 44). This leads to questions of what skills and knowledge a practitioner must (initially) possess, and how best to educate planners including the nature of the learning environment.

Similar to the practice debate, there is an ongoing discussion around planning education. The curriculum cannot stand still, but rather must be an evolving entity that is revisited and revised in response to contemporary debates on the core competencies of planning practitioners. This is necessary to meet the challenges of a continually changing urban environment (Friedmann, 1996). The approaches of 1960s technocratic planning practice, for example, are not suitable for addressing the ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973) that exist in urban areas today. The ability to devise comprehensive spatial interventions (LeGates, 2009) and collaborate as a team member in a multi-disciplinary, inter-professional environment (Ellis, Morison, & Purdy, 2008) are examples of the competencies necessary for the practitioner to operate in what is a complex interactive and integrative planning arena (Wong, Baker, & Kidd, 2006). In determining what knowledge and technical skills form planning education, consideration must be given on how best to develop a student’s ability to challenge, to think critically and to respond creatively when applying knowledge in the planning arena (Poxon, 2001, p. 575). Examples of this include the introduction of reflective practice in education which emphasises an understanding of the context within

which planners operate, and the role(s) adopted by practitioners (Beunen, Hagens, & Neuvel, 2007; Sletto, 2010). Experiential learning through urban studios and practice-based projects is another technique for developing students with necessary practical skills for a career in the profession (see: Senbel, 2012; Sletto, 2010; Viswanathan, Whitelaw, & Meligrana, 2012), though this approach can also be fraught with difficulty because of the expectations of communities (Kotval, 2003). There is agreement amongst academics and practitioners that students should learn practice behaviour and communicative skills, but these are inherently challenging to teach (Edwards & Bates, 2011).

A collaborative approach is required between practitioners and academics with theory and evidence-guiding practice, and practice-informing education (*ibid.*, p. 4). Focusing on skills alone, though, will not make for an effective planner. Of equal (if not more) importance is an understanding of the wider socio-political context within which the practitioner operates as this can positively or negatively impact the level of engagement and commitment (Johnson, 2011), and therefore productivity. For example, planning processes that seek to incorporate local community values into development plans and strategies are considered to be more participatory, more productive and ultimately more sustainable (UN-Habitat, 2014). At the core of practice is how planners think, act and operate. As a consequence,

Planning courses need to embrace a set of values, skills and capacities to equip planners to function effectively whatever aspect of planning they choose. (Budge, 2009, p. 13)

This though begs the question: What informs these attributes and in particular, values, within planning schools? Spatial rationalities exhibited in development often conflict – such as ‘public good’ versus ‘developer profit’ – thus making for difficult planning practice (Dierwechter, 2008, p. 239). It is here that professional bodies, such as the RTPI and Malawi Institute of Physical Planners (MIPP), inform and influence practice perspectives: both as accrediting bodies and also because individual faculty members may have an affiliation, either voluntarily or required under their contract of employment. For example, MIPP seeks to, ‘secure the confidence of the public on the aims and objectives of planning and the planning profession by promoting their participation in the process’ (2004, p. 2).

Therefore, at a basic level, planning students must be made aware of how the public and private sector environments differ, including underpinning values, and that – with reference to the diversity of the discipline – there is no standard set of skills required in practice (Guzetta & Bollens, 2003). In teaching planning theory, academicians need to take care not to present a universalised set of ideas, but rather emphasise the importance of being context specific in understanding and intervention (Frank, 2006; Healey, 2012; Watson, 2014). Likewise, it is important that the skills and knowledge taught to students are first tested for suitability, including the model proposed through this paper:

African planning schools operate in a context in which urban planning practices, national planning legislation and planning curricula remain largely inherited from their older colonial pasts, and continue to promote ideas and policies transferred from the global north. As such, many of these ideas and practices are inappropriate in contexts characterised by rapid growth, poverty and informality. (Odendaal, 2012, p. 174)

A debate is taking place within the planning education literature around the ‘basic’ and ‘applied’ knowledge required in a planning degree (Dowling & Ruming, 2013). There is an increased emphasis placed on employability which may require the redesign of curricula. A more detailed review of employability takes place below. It is important here to highlight

three issues which have been observed in planning education in Malawi. First, the concept of employability may only be understood at a basic level by students, in terms of being job-ready (or, as appears in the literature elsewhere, ‘oven-ready’) on graduation (ibid.) as a means for gaining swift entry into the employment market. Any steps taken in amending the curriculum to incorporate employability must be explained to students. If students are aware of how and why their employability skills are being developed, and recognise the importance of the approach, then they will take ownership of these initiatives, offering far more chance of success (Gammie et al., 2002 cited in Baker & Henson, 2010, p. 64). Second, employability skills will inevitably change over time. This is particularly the case for practitioners progressing along a career pathway into senior management who may be required to develop new philosophical positions and more advanced political skills (Swearingen White & Mayo, 2005). Therefore, the target lifespan for employability skills at initial planning education is for relevance in practice over the short to medium term; a long-term horizon is not possible as there are too many unknown variables. Further training may be required in the longer term as planners move from initial technical jobs to dealing with complex political issues. Third, employability is not only a skill; it is also a mind-set of the individual practitioner (Frank, 2007). In other words, the outward expression of employability skills – e.g. communication, negotiation and team-working – must be rooted in inner qualities possessed by the planning practitioner.

2.2. Components of employability skills

A wide literature has been published on employability: what it comprises and how it is practiced (see e.g. Cole & Tibby, 2013, pp. 6–9). Indeed, there is no accepted clear and cohesive definition (King, 2009, p. 32). Likewise there is no single, ideal, prescription for the embedding of employability into curricula (Yorke & Knight, 2006, p. 2). Guidance is though available on how to *review* a curriculum and *where* in the curriculum employability may best be positioned (ibid., p. 14). This latter point is developed by Cranmer (2006, p. 172) who proposes a model for methods of delivering employability skills, ranging from the ‘total embedding of employability skills’ to ‘parallel development of generic skills’. The intention here is not to attempt a universal definition of employability, but rather to provide a working understanding of the concept by synthesising common components that inform the model established at Mzuzu University.

At the core, employability is about ‘supporting students to develop a range of knowledge, skills, behaviours, attributes and attitudes which will enable them to be successful not just in employment but in life ... It is not just about preparing students for employment’ (Cole & Tibby, 2013, pp. 5–6). Alternatively, employability is the ability to be in employment, sustain employment and to progress within work (Belt, Drake, & Chapman, 2010, p. 2). A graduate’s employability is determined by individual factors, personal circumstances and demand factors (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005); the sphere of influence that a university can reasonably be expected to have is the individual (that is, student and consequently graduate) factors domain.

Employability can be generically understood in terms of transferable soft skills and competencies (or as Baker and Henson (2010, p. 63) note, ‘attributes’ may be a more appropriate term) possessed by graduates attractive to employers. The list comprises professionalism; reliability; ability to cope with uncertainty; ability to work under pressure; ability to plan

and think strategically; capability to communicate and interact with others; good written and verbal communication skills; ICT skills; creativity and self-confidence; good self-management and time-management skills; and a willingness to learn and accept responsibility (Andrews & Higson, 2008, p. 213). This largely mirrors the discipline-specific skills identified by the UK graduate planner employers (McLoughlin, 2012, p. 6).

Employability is not an activity confined to the university education context, but is part of formal and informal lifelong learning processes. Skills are not just for the recent graduate, but are also required of employees in the workplace 'who seek to manage and adapt to change and the demands of complex employment situations' (Brodie & Irving, 2007, p. 12). Furthermore, mature undergraduates may have already developed employability skills (King, 2009). Strong academic-practitioner connections are necessary not only for developing employability skills by students, but also as a support for graduates transitioning into the workplace (Savage, Davis, & Miller, 2009), though the rationale for such a role is debateable (Atkins, 1999). Employer engagement is crucial because employability skills cannot be successfully taught solely in the classroom (Cranmer, 2006). Work-based learning, a form of employer engagement, is a useful means for enhancing the student learning experience and consolidating learning (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012). Freestone, Thompson and Williams (2006, p. 240) highlight that work-based learning is highly variable in form and character including *inter alia*, formal fieldwork, sandwich courses and placements. Such approaches, however, are not a straight substitute for the classroom as students and teachers are required to develop, and perhaps change, their conceptual frameworks of knowledge, knowing and learning (Brodie & Irving, 2007, p. 12).

3. Malawi planning context: practice and education

Malawi's planning history is closely linked to British planning ideologies whose linkage is evident in the adoption of the Town and Country Planning Act (1947) as Malawi's Town and Country Planning Act in 1948. However, planning was applicable only to settlements in which Europeans resided, and even then only in specified (European) neighbourhoods. Consequently, urban planning schemes were introduced first in the four major towns of Blantyre, Lilongwe, Zomba and Mzuzu and later in district centres. The influence of British thinking on Malawian planning practice continued into the 1970s and 1980s with the 'new town' approach implemented through the secondary centres project designed to relieve pressure on the larger settlements, the schemes focused on Malawi's secondary centres.

The 1948 Act was replaced by the 1988 Town and Country Planning Act, which embraced three levels of planning: National Physical Development Planning, District Physical Development Planning and local (urban) physical development planning. At the local level, planning emphasised an urban structure planning approach which resulted in the separation of communities based on income. Rapid urbanisation since independence in 1964 led to the expansion of urban areas through sprawl and boundary changes taking over otherwise informally settled customary peri-urban land. The new-found freedoms brought about by multi-party politics in 1994 also opened the window for increased rural-urban migration. A decentralisation policy approved in 1996, to devolve functions including planning to local councils, revealed the glaring weakness to regulate urban development. This policy direction entailed the creation of over 320 planning positions in 40 local council areas. Alongside

the devolution process was the land reform initiative which identified staff shortages as contributing to widespread unregulated urban growth (Government of Malawi [GoM], 2002, p. 24). The major outcome of the land reform programme was the land policy which called for further devolution of land management to land tribunals located at traditional authority (TA) area level. With less than 20 professionally qualified planners in 2005, the need arose to recruit planners into both local councils and central government. Planners would also perform supervisory roles of land clerks stationed in the TA areas.

Faced with the urgency to implement devolution and land reform processes, the Malawi Government however started to recruit non-cognate graduates including administrators and teachers into planning positions. This situation caused apprehension amongst the few professional planners in the country under the umbrella of MIPP who were concerned about the possible negative repercussions of this initiative. The role of professional institutes has been spelt out by Levy, Mattingly and Wakely (2011, p. 21) as helping 'to set standards and provide institutional support from the wider profession, and can be a link between education and practice'. MIPP, which has affiliation with the Commonwealth Association of Planners and was a founder member of African Planning Association, thus became instrumental in endorsing and ensuring the professional legitimacy of the training programme.

Hitherto, and despite a planning history dating to 1948, the local planning-related education was limited to non-professional courses offered in the Geography and Earth Sciences Department of the University of Malawi at Chancellor College. Students studied a combination of subjects that included: regional planning, town planning and urban studies, demography/population and development, geology, geomorphology and pedology, rural development and environment and natural resources management. Specialised planning studies were undertaken outside the country, usually in British or British-oriented universities, for example, in Australia or New Zealand (Manda, 2013). These formed the cadre of planning practitioners that has been instrumental in physical planning and development of statutory planning instruments in the country. Demands for democratisation as a funding conditionality contributed to a reduction in the number of scholarships for external studies.

The profession was in a fragile position with planners accused by politicians of preventing or delaying development, and the community in many areas frustrated by the perceived slow pace of decision-making (Manda, 2004). Central government eventually recognised the need for courses in Malawi. New planning programmes were introduced at Mzuzu University and Malawi Polytechnic to train adequate number of planners to, using the expression of Watson and Odendaal (2013) 'staff the civil service'. That is to fill existing central, and newly created, local government positions. The degree programme was considered central to the success of the land reform programme (Enemark & Ahene, 2003).

The introduction of the physical planning programme at Mzuzu University and Malawi Polytechnic was therefore not only a cost-saving measure (Manda, 2013), but also a response to the acute shortage of physical planners (Enemark & Ahene, 2003) whose role in sustainable environmental management and regulation of settlement growth attained national recognition through the land policy (GoM, 2002, p. 24). Though not a stated objective, the contextual relevance of planning education would as well be realised.

In line with the university 'outcomes based' philosophy (Mzuzu University, 2005), and the practical needs of the land reform programme, the planning degree itself focused on ensuring that students acquired professional knowledge as well as practical skills through 'learning by doing' (Enemark & Ahene, 2003). To achieve this expectation, the programme

was formulated to uniquely synergise three degree specialisations in land management (land surveying, estate management and physical planning) by combining classes in the first year. The expectation was that students would acquire broad land management knowledge and in so doing become useful land use planning practitioners in the community, enlightened in the demands for land registration. In years two to four, students would study core planning subjects: regional planning; rural development; spatial planning models; planning law and development control; local physical (town) planning and urban design; governance and local economic development; population and development; land tenure studies; housing studies; urbanisation and informal settlements; transport planning and environmental management (including impact assessment); disaster management; and urban agriculture. In addition to these discipline-specific areas, students would also take modules in generic subjects, which reflect the transferable skills of the planner: geographical information systems; professional practice and ethics; project planning and management; and research methodology.

4. Mzuzu University EPA approach

The model which we outline in Section 5 below emerged from a project involving Mzuzu University, Malawi Polytechnic and the University of Ulster in 2010–2011. We outline here why this project was necessary in the first place, what the project was intended to achieve in terms of outcomes, project methodology and a brief performance review. We felt it necessary to include this detail in the paper not only to explain how the model worked in practice, but also because the practical information contained here may be a useful reference point.

4.1. Rationale

As outlined above, the planning profession in Malawi, and the underpinning education base, was at something of a crossroads in 2010. At that stage, both programmes had admitted students but no cohorts had yet graduated. There was ongoing concern that, whilst opportunities existed for employment in planning agencies across Malawi, these tended to be filled by graduates from non-cognate qualifications. Academics in the country identified a need to bridge the gap between employers and education providers to demonstrate the appropriability of graduates from the new programme at Mzuzu University and Malawi Polytechnic to professional planning positions, thereby enhancing their employability. A similar approach to curriculum development in planning education has been adopted elsewhere (Stubbs & Keeping, 2002). It is in this context that the project *‘Embedding employability in urban and regional planning education in Malawi’* was conceptualised between the two Malawian partners and the University of Ulster, a UK institution which has a recognised history and developed expertise in graduate employability across discipline areas, particularly through an academic–public–private partnership approach. It was agreed by the partners that a key objective of the Ulster approach was a useful starting point in designing the EPA project:

To ensure that programme developments enhance student employability by reflecting student and employer needs (regionally, nationally and internationally) and, as appropriate, government policy on skills, and that programmes of study prepare students for employment and further study. (University of Ulster, 2006)

This particularly resonated in Malawi, where the space of planning professionals was contested and, in many regards, was becoming overwhelmed by a tidal wave of rural–urban

migration and informal development as well as demands of devolution and land reform referenced earlier. The approach at Ulster resonates with the aim of Mzuzu University to provide ‘high quality education, training ... to meet the technological, social and economic needs of individuals and communities in Malawi’ (Mzuzu University, 2005). The project was an opportunity to counter-balance some of the negative perceptions around planning by engaging with government, enhancement of the courses through curriculum review and general publicity of the project, for example. in news media reporting.

4.2. Project outcomes: enhanced graduate employability and education partnership

Mzuzu University implemented the employability project in 2010–2011 to enhance professional skills with the aim of assisting the development of the existing planning programme with specific regard to teaching content and learning methods that would lead to the employment of graduates in this sector. The project was in line with global calls to reinvent planning (Hague, Wakely, Crespín, & Jasko, 2006). For example, Frank (2007, p. 636) considered the lack of entrepreneurship skills in planning education as restricting, ‘students’ employment options and by extension the influence of planning as a whole’. Coming from the context of non-specialist graduates entering planning employment, it was felt that the enhancement of graduate skills would also safeguard the planning profession in Malawi. The project was thus framed around achieving three overarching outcomes: (1) undergraduate skills training leading to enhanced employment opportunities; (2) enhanced teaching and learning capacity through staff development; and (3) development of public–private–academic partnerships, explained further below.

For the purpose of the project, we organised ‘employability skills’ under two criteria that graduates need to demonstrate: ‘generic’ and ‘discipline specific’. This provided a framework in discussions with stakeholders and assisted in identifying possible complementarities in the teaching of skills in collaboration with other discipline areas in Mzuzu University. Generic skills included presentation and communication skills, report writing, leadership, computer literacy and general analytical ability. Discipline-specific skills incorporated the wide range of planning practice and theories to demonstrate an understanding of, and capacity to, influence, social, economic and environmental issues specific to the Malawi context. Developing both sets of skills was considered by participants in the process as essential not only for employability of graduates but also for the recognition, identity and maturation of the profession in Malawi. The key issue here is: if planning practice can be conducted with sufficient rigour, insight and competence by non-cognate graduates, then there is no need for a planning degree programme. By exploring the various and potential roles of professional planners, the project demonstrated to stakeholders this was not the case, thereby creating a more favourable employment market for graduates to enter.

Cooperation through a public–private–academic partnership approach made it possible for a range of stakeholders to become involved in the planning curriculum review process (Table 1). The project provided a catalyst for these stakeholders to further engage in training the next generation of urban and regional planners in Malawi to address local, regional and national human resource needs and development. Participants reported that this platform would not otherwise have been achieved in the short to medium term without the intervention of this project.

Table 1. Participating organisations in the Malawi EPA project.

Stakeholder (type)	Participant details
Employers (external)	Local government: Blantyre City Council; Lilongwe City Council; Mzuzu City Council; Mzimba District Council; Nkhata Bay District Council; Rumphi District Council; Karonga District Council; and Lilongwe (Rural) District Council Central government: Ministry of Economic Planning and Development; Department of Physical Planning; Department of Geology Surveys; Department of Disaster Management Affairs; Regional Housing Office Agencies, NGOs and representative organisations: German Development Service (DED)/Giz; Malawi Local Government Association (MALGA); Malawi Housing Corporation; Centre for Community Organisation and Development; UN-HABITAT (Malawi); and Malawi Institute of Physical Planners Private sector: Chiwovani Associates
Future employees (internal)	Student representatives, Mzuzu University
Education providers (internal)	Faculty staff: Department of Geography, Mzuzu University; Department of Forestry, Mzuzu University; Centre for Open and Distance Learning (CODL) Mzuzu University; and Department of Land Management, Mzuzu University

The reach of the project was substantial, with over 90 individuals involved in various events. In addition to the external organisations listed in Table 1, students from Mzuzu University also participated in a number of workshops. This served as a means for testing proposals with the student body, as well as helping students understand the importance of employability skills through the discussions that took place with employers at the workshops. Academic staff also participated in workshops both internal to the university and with external stakeholders.

4.3. Methodology

The model we adopted through the project, the focus of this paper, is explained in Section 6 below. In following a partnership approach, we were willing to engage with all relevant stakeholders. We did not consider curriculum review and the embedding of employability skills as an activity for a select few. Rather, we were intentionally open and transparent; the legitimacy of the process was important to the overall aims of the project in terms of moving the planning profession forward in Malawi. A contact list of individuals and agencies was drawn up for the consultative phase of the review process and letters of invitation issued. Details of the project were also recorded at MIPP committee meetings.

We used workshops as our main consultative tool for engaging stakeholders, which reduced repetition in explaining the project and also overcame communication barriers. Similar to debates globally, practitioners and academics in Malawi have latterly recognised the issue of graduate skills. That is not to say there was no consideration given to employability when the course was devised at Mzuzu University. Rather, at that stage, there was insufficient engagement outside of the panel from central government and Mzuzu University who were the ‘initiators’ and the ‘owners’ of the curriculum development process. Wider participation in the process thus became a driver for us, enabled through a total of six stakeholder workshops and three staff skills workshops. Workshops focused on scrutiny of the curriculum and allowed stakeholders to suggest areas for review and incorporation. These workshops led to introduction of new topics, additions to content and renaming of some subjects to reflect potential employers’ expectations. This was supported by a series of one-to-one meetings with policy and technical staff of potential employing institutions,

especially the Department of Physical Planning and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development for clarification on employability skills. The focus of these meetings was also analysis of teaching content, learning methods and outcomes with employer expectations of graduates mapped against the curriculum. This helped identify gaps but also was an opportunity to showcase to employers the existing standards of planning education. This affirms the view of stakeholders interviewed as part of the independent evaluation, 'you cannot train graduates without consultation with would-be employers and expect them to be employed' (Zuka, 2011). This phase of the project was laborious and time-consuming, requiring both administrative and academic resources to organise, implement and manage.

4.4. Review

Several of the project outcomes are difficult to measure in the short term, though we would expect to see patterns emerging over the longer term. Indeed, we are already starting to see that graduates are attaining employment in the sector, and with awareness of the programme now enhanced including the reticulist skills of planners, graduates are being selected for employment in cognate areas such as housing and environmental management. Mzuzu University is also reporting a gradual increase in the number of applicants seeking entry to the programme. From an academic perspective, staff at Mzuzu University where focus is on outcomes, a similar approach to employability skills, reported an enhanced understanding of the curriculum review process.

More specifically, the workshops and consultations highlighted employers' expectations of planning education were linked with the development of cognitive and individual capabilities specifically those able to address informality, land disputes, waste management, disaster reduction and supportive of the devolution process. Interaction between academia and stakeholders led to updating of the curriculum content and in certain cases, renaming of subjects to reflect the expectation of employers. Stakeholders were of the view that the planning curriculum should also contribute to poverty alleviation and address emerging development issues such as HIV and AIDS, informal settlement and environmental degradation. This has been adopted into the Mzuzu University course. Specialisation, noted above, was also changed from commencing at year three to year two to ensure adequate time for the coverage of core subjects. Furthermore, the project, being the first intervention of such nature in planning curriculum development in Malawi, offered opportunities amongst academics and practitioners for networking and feedback on developing learning outcomes in the planning degree programme. The very ethos of this collaboration mirrors the multidisciplinary and governance philosophy of planning as institutionalised in the Local Government Act (1996). Specifically, the stated goal of this Act was to democratise local development planning process through inclusion and participation of people served (Kruse, 2005).

5. A model for embedding employability

Reflecting on the approach to embedding employability at Mzuzu University, a model for practice emerges (see Table 2). This was an intended outcome of the activity with which Mzuzu University was involved alongside Malawi Polytechnic. It was considered then (as now) that although guidance is available on the specificities of curriculum review (see e.g. Yorke & Knight, 2006), this is only one component of the much wider engagement necessary.

Table 2. Model for embedding employability within planning education.

Step	Action	Explanation
1	Evaluate the current position of the teaching programme As appropriate, move to step 2	This can be an internal activity involving individual staff members, department or whole faculty based on external examiner recommendations, staff experience, bench marking with other programmes, university strategic plan and/or national policy strategies
2	Identify a 'champion' for taking forward the process	The champion may be a member of academic staff, manager of the university or someone external who is recognised as a 'leader' in promoting curriculum development
3	Define and (re-) establish relationships with relevant stakeholders	Communication is key: establish links with key policy institutions on defining employability skills for the sector; information to stakeholders about the intended actions
4	Work with students to explain the need for, and benefits from, curriculum change	Students can be those that already graduated to garner feedback about the programme in practice or can be students currently in schools through debates over the curriculum and delivery approaches
5	Amend the curriculum	The amendments obviously follow prescribed university systems, but minor ones could start from the department
6	Consult stakeholders using workshops	Stakeholders' input is vital as employers; they expect students trained in specific disciplines and with specific skills. Therefore, developing employability skills with potential employers is essential
7	Appraise stakeholders of changes made (if any) through follow-up meetings and circulation of the curriculum	Formal feedback will be required as this can be a basis for justifying the amendments in future. The whole curriculum document can be sent out for stakeholders' internal review and thereafter expected detailed feedback
8	Performance review	The period for review is usually stated in the curriculum document. It is important to develop indicators which may include number of graduates actually employed and employers' qualitative opinions

In the context of (spatial) planning, as a vocational academic discipline area (see: Castels, (1998, p. 27 cited by Huxley, 1999) view of planning as 'not a discipline but a profession), it is vital to ensure that the correct employability skills are identified, appropriately taught, learned by the student and supported by the profession. All of these are discrete issues, some of which may be contested, as has occurred with curriculum change elsewhere (Speight, Lackovic, & Cooker, 2013).

Evaluate the current position of the teaching programme: in terms of employability skills, graduate opportunities and connections with the profession. The purpose of this step is to identify whether or not action is required, and can be undertaken prior to formulating a new programme by assessing existing provision. It may well be that both faculty staff and the profession are satisfied with the current status of the programme. Evaluation could take the form of a regular review, for example, every 3–5 years, in alignment with the established education institutional review (course validation) processes, or in response to a specific set of circumstances such as a fundamental change in practice, public policy or macro-external event such as the financial crisis. The review could be prompted or informed by external examiner comments; partnership board reports from accrediting bodies; and feedback from the profession on the performance of graduates, national policy strategies and strategic plans; and bench mark with other programmes. Links to other institutions or networks may alert academicians to 'good' practice elsewhere (though being alert to issues of context). For example, Mzuzu University significantly benefitted from its membership of the AAPS which was at the time implementing a project to revitalise planning (Watson & Odendaal, 2013). In the case of Mzuzu University, the process started with the evaluation of the teaching programme (Step 1) because there had been several stakeholder engagements during initial

formulation of the curriculum as recently as 2005. However, evaluation for developing a new programme would involve a comprehensive situation analysis. This list is not exhaustive; rather, the point is that the curriculum is not stagnant but should be seen as a learning space, without beginning or end (Speight et al., 2013, p. 124).

Identify a 'champion' for taking forward the process: having established the need to take action, focus turns to operationalising a review process. It is our experience that one person, or a small team, should be appointed to take responsibility for leading – or *championing* – the process. This person or team will not be the delivery agent for all the actions arising from the review. Rather, their role is to keep the process moving, for example, by providing regular progress updates and be a single point of contact with the various stakeholders who will be involved. Such a person or team should be recognised (though not necessarily appointed) by management as a means for demonstrating institutional support for the initiative, and demonstrate the same team-working ability promoted within the employability skills-set. The role of external champions (such as head of government planning department or political leader) in supporting the initiative can be explored.

Define and (re-) establish relationships with relevant stakeholders: this may seem a trivial step in the overall model, especially for institutions that have a close working relationship with the profession. Even with professional practice experience amongst academic staff, changes made to the planning curriculum at Mzuzu University would not have achieved the desired outcome without stakeholder involvement. This can be a resource (time; hosting of meetings) consuming process, even if members of the teaching team are already 'plugged into' professional networks. A communication plan may also prove helpful here: whilst stakeholders need to understand the employability concept, they do not need to know the intricacies of institutional regulations. We took the decision to share the curriculum document with stakeholders, whilst remaining sensitive to making unreasonable demands or assumptions about external groups. Representatives from the public and private sectors may not always be available at the same time in the day (or week). Stakeholders should be valued partners in the process. It may be possible to involve stakeholders at a later stage for practitioner inputs on the programme, or in establishing an advisory group as part of annual monitoring of the course.

Work with students to explain the need for, and benefits from, curriculum change: the purpose of this is twofold. First, and pragmatically, as students effectively enter into a contract with the university when commencing their course – with the expectation they will be expertly educated in the subject area – curriculum change, if perceived negatively, may give the impression of altering that contract. A collaborative approach is therefore necessary that addresses any concerns raised by students to maintain a positive staff–student relationship. Second, students – when seeking employment – will be responsible for promoting themselves. It is critical that students are able to identify the skills an employer requires, and recognise if they do (or do not) possess these skills as a result of their initial planning education. In this way, we can realise Schon's (1987) proposition on how to educate reflective (planning) practitioners to handle complex and unpredictable problems such as poverty and informality of the global south.

Amend the curriculum: universities have specific guidelines on procedures for curriculum amendment. Our experience, though, highlights two key issues. First, academic rigour must be maintained throughout. This can be challenging to achieve, especially if a high number of stakeholders are involved in the review process with each seeking the introduction or

enhancement of specific skills. Second, that the teaching team should balance any new learning content with what can practicably be delivered on the course with finite resources.

Consult stakeholders: involving stakeholders in curriculum development and review is essential as many are also potential employers and have expectations of graduates trained in specific disciplines and with specific skills (discussed in Section 2). Stakeholders include professional body, the MIPP.

Appraise stakeholders of changes made (if any): this is more than ‘good housekeeping’. We found that this was a valuable step in the overall process that demonstrated we had acted on comments made by the stakeholders and could explain why other proposals were not adopted. This helped in two regards. First, and as noted above, this keeps the stakeholders engaged in the process by creating a sense of value, which increases the likelihood of building (or, in the case of pre-existing contact, reinforcing) a long-term sustainable relationship. Second, that the stakeholders will recognise graduates from Mzuzu University as having an improved skills-set, enhancing their employability.

Performance review: the focus here is both on the *process* of curriculum review leading to the embedding of employability and also the *outcome* of any changes made to the curriculum. We do not intend to prescribe specific questions as these will be institution and context specific. Our generic questions include whether or not the curriculum review proceeded as intended and what improvements could be made, and measuring any change in graduate employment levels (though this is subject to market circumstances). Performance review is not the end of the process. Once the concept is embedded into the curriculum, content will need to be updated and teaching methods revised to ensure the ‘currency’ of the programme both in terms of employability and knowledge development. We expect that the model will be useful for this process also.

6. Conclusion

The planning profession in Malawi has been on a journey since the 1940s, which has recently culminated in the employment of graduates from, and educated in, the country, who are crucial in operationalising the planning system at both local and central governments. Likewise, planning education in Malawi has also been evolving, though maturing over a much shorter timeframe. In many regards, this has meant that academics and practitioners have been able to proceed more quickly in resolving issues and grasping opportunities experienced elsewhere by devising interventions appropriate to the Malawian context. This is also the case with employability skills development in planning education. In legitimising the process of curriculum review, a model has emerged from the project which uses an academic–public–private partnership approach to engage stakeholders through workshops and consultations, leading to the updating of the curriculum, delivery methods and outcomes.

We suggest four key learning points from our experience of implementing the model to embed employability skills into the curriculum at Mzuzu University. Firstly, there is no doubt that planning education is now in a stronger position as a direct result of the project, not only because of the wider range of stakeholders involved but also the form of involvement in the curriculum review process as outlined in the model. This is a strength of the model, which reflects the collaborative, democratic ethos of how local government generally and planning specifically will be delivered in Malawi. Secondly, it is possible to relieve the tension between academia and practice with regard to teaching content and skills

development. This was achieved through a consensus approach and, in the case of Mzuzu University, the appointment of lecturing staff who have practice experience. In Malawi, there is an immediate need for skilled planning graduates because of historical education deficits with resultant pressure, voiced at our project workshops, on education providers to produce 'oven-ready' planners. Whilst the employment market can influence the tone of education programmes, we would also argue that this should not lead to the abandonment of academic rigour. Thirdly, that a comprehensive strategic view must be taken of changes to teaching content arising from curriculum review. This includes, for example, impacts on staff or physical resources (including timetabling) across all programmes and is especially the case for courses taught jointly with other disciplines. Fourth, context is crucial and must be considered when revising or devising new content. As the programme in Malawi is developed on the background of serious human resource deficiencies created by devolution and land reform initiatives, success is contingent on the careful consideration of contextual application. In this regard, academic and practitioner networks are invaluable in supporting the development of resources, as experienced in the collaboration with AAPS and guidance on the introduction of community-based studio classes.

In our view, the greatest challenge that lies ahead for planning education, and the wider development of the profession in Malawi, is the research base from which to develop teaching content. At present, whilst there is a (limited) literature available, typically from government- and consultancy-produced reports, the scope of peer-reviewed academic research specific to the planning discipline in Malawi is limited in comparison to developed countries, a challenge we encountered preparing for this project and highlighted through the literature review of this paper. Academic capacity in the country must be enhanced, for example, through staff development programmes to create a research culture amongst teaching staff at Mzuzu University (and Malawi Polytechnic), and the encouragement of academic debate. This will provide a valuable resource when using the model in any future curriculum review.

Note

1. DEL – Department for Employment and Learning, the government department responsible for further and higher education and skills development in Northern Ireland.

Acknowledgements

We thank the British Council and the Department for Learning (Northern Ireland) for their administrative and financial support of the Education Partnerships in Africa (EPA) initiative which enabled this employability project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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