

**How to Prepare Urban Development Experts  
Capable to Face Present and Future Impacts such as  
Globalization, Commodification, Climate Change, Migration and All the Rest**

**Outline Philosophy for an International Urban Master's Program 'Urban Challenges'  
by Kosta Mathey**

**Published 2021 in**

Koditek, Thomas, Luther, Christian (Hrsg.)

**Praxismanual Situationsansatz**

Ein Bildungskonzept für Pädagogik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft

ISBN: 978-3-658-32696-8

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-658-32696-8>

**1. About**

Starting with outlining the perceivable void in adequate planning and management wisdom in contemporary urban development and the reasons for the same, the author suggests a more appropriate approach to prepare future professionals in this field at the higher education level. Starting from his past experience of founding and directing a highly successful advanced Master's program for international students he develops that concept further and pays special attention to feasibility in practice.

**2. Justification**

Over many centuries, **cities** used to be privileged places which offered protection to their residents against foreign soldiers and wild animals. Later on, they promised independence from feudal oppression. As centres of production and trade they created wealth, fostered culture and distraction. The status of influential families was displayed by their big and ornamental residences which gave rise to the profession of the architects who rightly considered themselves as creators of the city. In this tradition, architectural faculties at university level offer tuition in **Urban Design** ('Städtebau' in German) where until today they claim the authority of creating an aesthetically pleasing built environment.

However, since **Industrialization** in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the implicit and culminating division of labour in logistical and geographic terms brought new and unforeseen problems to towns, too: poverty, epidemics, pollution, mass migration, loss of culture, uncontrolled growth... just to name a few. Engineers took over the provision of (mostly invisible) urban infrastructure and

the faculties of building engineering occasionally also opened careers in **Urban (and regional) planning** – usually with a focus on legal and administrative aspects.

Over the last couple of decades, the appearance of Globalization and Neo-Liberalism both reduced further the relative power of local governments to regulate the evident and multiple problems of many cities – especially the New Urban poverty, overcrowding, homelessness, uncontrolled and badly designed constructions, collapsing traffic, pollution and environmental threats and so on. Most of the described **problem areas are multi-causal** and cannot be satisfactorily corrected by the above-mentioned professionals who have been educated our modern specialized university landscape.

A sensitive conclusion would be to overcome the deep fragmentation of education into many highly specialized professions involved in city growth and seek a holistically **educated urban generalist expert** – in a way going back to the roots of the institution 'University'. I do not propose to turn back the wheel of time but rather to bridge the gaps that has broken between too many fragmented fields of science. In addition, mostly theoretical base of university education needs to be complemented with **field experience** and enriched the diversity of personal talents that are part of each **personality**.

As a last observation it should be noted that urban development planning must incorporate the necessary **flexibility to adjust to unforeseen needs** that arise from relatively sudden events or phenomena – such as natural disasters, wars, political outbreaks or the change of planning paradigm (like the shift from large scale urban redevelopment to renovation and conservation). They must be considered as risks for we need to prepare ourselves, but they cannot be predicted. Prognostic games, art or literature (reference cases: Jules Verne or Aldous Huxley) can inspire us to prepare for unforeseen scenarios.

### 3. Target group

Even if we identify a need for cross sector experts to understand and to face the interwoven challenges posed by today's large urban conglomerations, this does not exclude the demand very specialised professionals – for which there exist a sufficient choice of educational careers already. But for dismantling the complexity of the urban problematic, analysing external impacts born from globalization, understanding risks and opportunities linked to place branding or international investors, identifying international funding offers or city networks, being familiar with international urban experiences and best practices etc, a different type of education is required. Such a cross sector expert would be in charge of **decision making and coordination tasks** in municipal planning, become chief of section in a consultancy company, direct an NGO or join an international organization.

Since it would not be practical for such a professional to request half a dozen different university degrees before accepting the person to this graduate program, we propose the integration the integration of a set of **applicants from a maximum number of different professional backgrounds** who, through working in changing study groups through the semester learn from each other. To avoid working in an academic cloud, applicants with **previous work experience** are given preference in the same way as a **diverse representation of nationalities** is being sought (especially including countries from the Global South where the need for this type of urbanists is highest).

### 4. Staffing

Under the condition that the composition of students must be international, it goes without saying that the teaching **staff should be international** in the same way.

As outlined above, tuition contents will address a wide range of professions or careers. This implies that no university faculty in the world could offer such a program exclusively with their home staff – especially if for matter of actuality, the detailed curriculum remains flexible. The majority of faculty will therefore be composed by invited **short term lecturers** who teach one or two courses per year. Most of them will be **internationally renowned** professors, authors of important reference books or- occasionally - a representative from an international agency.

Even if a series of short-term lecturers cost less to the university than one single permanent professor over the same time, the principal didactical reason for working with invited lecturers is that the **course topics should include the most up-to-date topics**, which the students are most likely interested to get familiar with. Maybe even more important benefit from such flexibility is the chance to win the best experts from all over the world – which would unlikely consider to take up a permanent position at a university abroad but tend to be happy to get to know a new university for a short course and at the same time enjoy worldwide publicity.

The most important criterium for the selection of lecturers draws from the general wisdom, that in any class **the personality of the teacher is at least as important as the factual knowledge** that he or she transmits in the course. It is the honesty of statements, the hidden messages in between the lines, the respect for the students' comments, the relevance of the tuition subject to city and its social context within.

## 5. Didactical philosophy

When, in 2008, I founded the international Master's program '*International Cooperation and Urban Development*' at TU Darmstadt – which soon after was accepted part of the EC Erasmus Mundus Program (supposedly the best 100 MS. Programs over Europe) – I compiled a short list of some 90+ subjects that ideally should be included in its curriculum. A team of experts from different cooperation agencies and the consultancy sector was invited to assist in the final selection of classes. We discussed every single of the shortlisted subjects and eventually, when they were asked to agree on a priority list, they answered that all of them were equally essential in their way.

This episode illustrates well, that other and **secondary selection criteria should also be taken into account in the final curriculum** for each intake. For logistical reasons the preferences of students – in spite of defending the principle of student democracy – would make it difficult to involve future students in prioritizing the definitive selection of their future courses. But the **course evaluation of last year's students** can certainly tell which course should be kept at all cost. Secondly, actuality can be assessed from the recent conference themes, job adverts and research calls. Last but not least, the availability of certain **renowned international lecturers** should be understood as an opportunity that will not necessarily return for a number of years.

To repeat some remarks from the above said, graduates from the outlined program will not be expected to solve detailed technical or administrative tasks (like learning a particular CAD program), but rather to liaise between different professions and hierarchical levels. They will take into account synergies, but also conflicts of interest, at the inter-institutional, regional, national and global level and relate them to possible local responses. While the necessary **inter-disciplinary understanding** will be achieved through team work in groups, **action-oriented project development** will be a characteristic of most course work. Adequate

communication of the work results is one of soft skills and be acquired in the group presentations at the end of each block course.

Complementary to the interdisciplinary orientation, experience ***with intercultural and polylingual settings*** is an asset always valued positively in a leading work position. Therefore we favour a 2-year M.Sc. program which is taught subsequently during one semester each ***in Asia, Europe and Latin America***. Optional compact language course may be attended in situ at each location before the start of the semester.

International joint Master program involving different universities are being promoted in various Education Sector programs of the European Commission – usually linked to ***special scholarship lines***. By complying to the EU Bologna declaration, individual exchanges will also be possible with compatible external university programs.

## 6. Networking

In the context of proceeding internationalization, ***personal academic and professional networks are an essential asset*** when it comes to responding to international calls or to build a good team for a joint venture. Casual conference conversations and the exchange of business cards are a very fragile basis for composing such a team, but a net of former classmates with whom one has worked in different group constellations for many hours per day over one or two years provides a much more reliable basis and can be valued a professional capital. In addition, a large part of the changing international course lecturers will additionally serve as resource persons for that network.

## 7. Curriculum

A recognised university degree does not necessarily guarantee great knowledge or wisdom, but contributes to ***professional credibility***. For the graduate of a program as it is outlined here it should be considered indispensable that such a degree offers the ***eligibility to a subsequent PhD study*** in Europe, North America and selected universities in other parts of the world. In European Universities such eligibility requires certain minimum standards defined in the 1999 Bologna Declaration and can be secured by ***certification through a recognized accreditation agency***.

These international regulations, which are meant to facilitate student mobility through mutual recognition of study modules attended and completed abroad, require highly standardized curricula. Nevertheless, conventional and precisely structured curricula run the risk that exchange students cannot use the acquired credits from one university in another. However, our above outlined program will not run such risk by defining only three or four (rather generically) sector-defined modules which may be composed by a minimum number but still variable courses.

An ***Internship*** is recommended – especially for students that did not have a formal work experience before applying – and is best shifted towards the end of the program (i.e. in combination with the thesis) as this offers the chance that the student will be offered a job by the same institution or company in continuation right after defending his or her thesis.

## 8. Distinctive characteristics

The educational vacuum when it comes to dealing with typical problems that big and modern cities are facing nowadays. This become evident in the first decade of the millennium as already outlined at the outset of this paper. That situation was also highlighted through the ***UN***

**Millennium Development Goals 2000**, the **UN Sustainable Development Goals 2015** and the **New Urban Agenda** by UNHABITAT in 2016.

Since then, a (still small) number of graduate university programs started to approach this rather complex problematic – although not necessarily from faculties of Planning and Architecture. **In Germany** there appeared almost simultaneously the *Urban Management Program* at TU Berlin, and the *International Cooperation and Urban Development* (focussing on the Global South) founded by the author of this paper at TU Darmstadt. Shortly after, *Urban Conglomerations* was opened at FH Frankfurt. Hafencity University Hamburg offers an interdisciplinary M.Sc. in *Resource Efficiency in Architecture and Planning* since about 2010 while Stuttgart University began a bi-national Egyptian/German M.Sc. program *integrated Urbanism and Urban Design* with sponsorship from both Governments.

**Outside Germany**, University College London is just starting two programs on *Sustainable Urbanism and Smart Cities* (with tuition fees of nearly € 30,000. - per year). The connotation of smart cities in combination with other disciplines like energy, design etc. popped up in number of European tuition programs (London, Edinburgh, Barcelona, Thessaloniki, Girona, Stockholm, but mostly seem to represent a more fashionable rephrasing for existing study careers in lower demand

This list is by no means exhaustive but, first of all, it indicates a **growing interest in urban development** which is good news for a problematic that for too long did not receive necessary attention from the academic institutions. It also shows that at least half of those programs are trying to jump on a departing train and modify or complement existing study offers which are in low demand because of excessive but politically prescribed study fees or for other reasons. Different from the first group that **aims at filling an educational gap** while the other group apparently aims at raising the output of graduates by **making a more efficient use of their existing human and other resources**. An interdisciplinary proposal is hardly perceivable if existing staff – or even entire programs – are recycled.

Interestingly enough, also the first group all chose different names for their programs and suggest a certain focus – which may have to do with the origin and history of the promoting department – but still have an interdisciplinary vision and the subjects on offer coincide in parts. So far, they all can fill their student capacity and therefore have no need to compete with each other. The proposal outlined in this paper – sharing some of the common contents too - goes a step further and carries the promise to offer a top – or **‘executive’ - quality educational program** through

- the selection of international top lecturers (no sitting staff to be occupied),
- tuition in three different (and highly attractive!) World Cities in three continents,
- an action-oriented approach prioritising the feasibility of proposals
- an incorporated meta-level educational plan towards personality formation
- active problem-based learning stimulated by a preceding magistral lecture

## 9. Finance

Already during the length of the program students will learn that any project is a lost effort without a **sound financial plan**. As this educational proposal is a project in the same sense it is mandatory to provide at least a minimal business plan (available upon request).

Generally speaking, it would be rather unrealistic to assume that a public university would be willing to open such a program with their own funding, except if it came from a present faculty member. If that was the case and **no study fees** are requested, there would be no shortage of applications and the best can be selected for admission.<sup>i</sup>

In some countries,<sup>ii</sup> also in public universities **study fees are requested by the government** - but will then end up in the exchequer and cannot be spend for program- specific expenses –

like external lecturers. Furthermore, as these countries usually request a much higher fee from foreign students – the international feature highlighted in the above paper will become very thin.

Postgraduate Master programs born from the **individual initiative of a professor** are rarely fully financed by a public university but may benefit from free use of infrastructure and no cost occurs for the Director if he or she are already employed by the university. But study fees need to be collected to finance (a limited number of) guest/contracted lecturers, some assistant staff (coordinator)<sup>iii</sup>, <sup>iv</sup>. If the Master's program is lucky to obtain a basic number of scholarships, the start-up years are easy to finance and subsequent years with no or less scholarships should still not be a problem, since scholarships imply automatic publicity. <sup>v</sup>

**Private Universities** are bound to levy study fees but are more likely to offer a start up subsidy which they can recover over time. Compared to public universities they usually can do with much less bureaucracy and can also accommodate smaller classes if they calculate their overhead as percentage of turnover instead of spreading their fixed costs evenly. They are also more flexible in experimenting with new models as they have no obligation to continue with a program that turns out not to be sustainable. However, accreditation may turn out to be a problem.

## 10. Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, all the **argumentation presented is based on the real experience** of an Advanced Masters which the author founded and directed at TU Darmstadt and which was replicated at the Vietnamese German University in Ho Chi Minh City (2008-11). The Darmstadt case was Double Degree Program which includes a first year in Germany and the second year either in Spain, Italy or France – a model very popular with the students. The alumni of the first two inputs maintain a close network and visit each other individually or in greater gathering as many of them are professionally moving between continents. About one Third have finished their PhD and most have leading positions at a municipality, an international Organization (mostly UN-HABITAT), some are in the Government or direct an NGO. The program is still running after 11 years and enjoys a high reputation in spite of some unavoidable changes in the meantime.

For this new proposed joint venture partner cooperation has already been confirmed by Tongji University in Shanghai (Dept of Urbanism) and University of Havana (Dept. of Geography and Subsidiary University San Geronimo in Old Havana)

---

i Notes.

Example: REAP at Hafencity Hamburg (the author is external lecturer in this course)

ii Example: Britain and the Netherlands

iii Example: Urban Agglomerations, FH Frankfurt

iv Example: Urban Management, TU Berlin

v Examples: International Cooperation and Urban Development