

[article for Margaret Bergen, *Urban Age*]

*'Why does a university engage in educating people to manage the world's explosively growing cities'*

by Don Aitkin

There's a simple answer to this question: cities have a great need, and universities have a capacity to meet that need. Of course, there is more to it than that.

Readers of *The Urban Age* do not need to be told that the world's cities — especially those in the developing countries — are growing at an astonishing rate, or that the mass movement into those cities represents the most profound social experience of our species in all its history.

The rate of change is so great (Pakistan's Karachi, for example, has become five times larger in the last 35 years) that the old models for managing cities have become unworkable. We still need urban planners — yes. But in the past planners could often assume a slow and orderly increase in scale, with new city residents waiting for the adoption of the plan before they moved into the new areas.

Few city administrations now have that kind of time-scale available. More than a third of Manila's residents are squatters, whose flimsy dwellings are constructed quickly wherever there is space. The provision of water, sewerage, electricity and gas, let alone of roads, schools and hospitals, often has to come after the people have arrived.

That task is ever more difficult because national governments, all over the world, have begun to opt out of responsibility for providing such services, which they see as a task for local, not national governments.

If that were not enough, cities are now connected to a global network of international finance which itself requires some quick modernisation, adding a set of pressures which competes with the demands from the residents of the impoverished new areas.

The managers of these burgeoning cities cannot rely on the skills which were enough in days gone by. A strict division of functions between engineers, accountants and administrators, a workable-enough arrangement in cities where growth is slow and predictable, can lead to political collapse in a fast-growing city.

All those who have major accountabilities need a much wider range of knowledge than was true for their predecessors. Whatever their own background, they need a new competence which includes financial understanding, especially of the fast-flowing international money market, a real awareness of the dilemmas which face their colleagues, a perspective which is

international rather than parochial, a capacity to synthesise diverse information, and some political savvy.

The last is not the least important. The bustling new mega-cities contain within them the seeds of national, even international, conflict. The sewage of one part of the city can easily become part of the water supply for another part. Urban squatters represent an underprivileged population with a capacity for angry reaction to economic downturn.

While a new generation of urban managers is needed, we cannot start with a clean slate: the first task is to educate those who presently have to manage the cities. Only over time can we build up a corpus of knowledge, trainers and the trained which will equip their successors to inherit these responsibilities smoothly.

Much of the capacity to carry out the training lies in the universities. For they too have changed, and grown astonishingly. Ninety per cent of today's universities did not exist at the end of the second world war, and they are dealing with a body of knowledge fifty times larger.

Whereas the older universities were built around bodies of disciplinary knowledge — physics, history, philosophy, anatomy — the newer ones have often been structured around social needs of one kind or another for knowledge organised for particular ends: environmental science and engineering, or nursing, or education, or management, or marketing, or tourism; the list is very large.

For the newer universities the task of educating the new generation of urban managers is straightforward, for what is involved is a familiar enough trans-disciplinary program in which teachers and students integrate economics, international finance, political science, management, contemporary history and geography.

A lot will be asked of the students, but they are not only graduates, but experienced, mature managers faced with some of the most difficult problems in the world. Much hangs on their capacity to solve problems quickly, so the program will have to involve them in the real dilemmas that their counterparts of facing right now.

One such program, built around an intensive one-year Master in Urban Management degree, is offered by the Centre for Developing Cities at my own University of Canberra, Australia. The course consists of twelve one-month modules, which can be taken at different times, or over a non-stop year. The teachers include people from across the world known for their eminence in this field.

The program ranges across issues as diverse as globalisation and international socio-economic trends, designing sustainable development, managing urban systems, and creating government/business/university partnerships. It is the

University's positive contribution to the enormous task of capacity-building for urban management in the developing world.

To support this international program the University adds its real competence in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, an expertise invaluable in preparing urban managers to deal on a daily basis with their counterparts elsewhere.

The Centre's courses are comparable to others offered by the University, which has developed a skill in working with large organisations of all kinds, helping them to lift their capacity and performance by involving their staff in focussed educational programs.

As a final thought, UC's Master in Urban Management degree is offered in one of the world's best-known planned 20th century cities. Canberra, a capital city begun in 1911 in what had been open pasture land, is today a beautiful, successful and sophisticated city of 300,00 people. No-one would suggest that Canberra has solved every urban problem, but it does offer the students in the program some hope that there are good, achievable outcomes in what they do.

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