

Memorandum

To: Chair Philip Harrison, Head of School Alan Mabin, Dean Raymond Nkado
From: Robert A. Simons, Ph.D., Professor and Fulbright Scholar
Subject: Wits Town Planning experience thoughts and reflections
Date: November 15, 2005

This memo outlines my thoughts about my Fulbright stay here at Wits. I am giving you some observations, and some suggestions for strengthening the students' experience so they are more effective when they are placed in their planning jobs.

I really enjoyed teaching my two classes, interacting with colleagues, learning about South Africa and Johannesburg, traveling, and working with the students. I learned a lot, and my experience here at Wits and in Johannesburg so far has been really great. There has been a lot of "take home" value for me, some of which I will only know when I return to Ohio.

On to my classes. The post-grad TRPL 533 class project (policy integration and analysis, focusing on housing on the Mine Dumps) was a real life, complex project. The students had not seen most of this material before. There was a sufficient number of guest speakers and supporting material provided for them to absorb it, but the time frame (block-release sprint class) was short. They had to do fieldwork (surveys), group work and a final report and presentation.

My other class in property (BUQS 518) was also very interesting. Those students were working, and their maturity level and focus was higher, as expected. This was a standard two-paper and final exam type of class format. The students taught me a lot about the RSA property system I also had my first experience coordinating a class. I liked it, and will try to do this back home in Ohio.

I also did five guest lectures in four other courses in TRPL and BUQS, and a housing seminar on my mine dumps project. I was disappointed that neither the chair nor head of school attended my housing seminar, which was the synthesis of both the class project and my research here at Wits.

Here is some constructive feedback, which I hope you can use to improve the planning curriculum as you move forward. Unless otherwise indicated, I am referring to the TRPL 533 class (14 students), of which about 12 were at the end of their first year of study.

I am making these statements about your students and program from the perspective of a former director of an accredited US planning program. I also have advised Al Ain University in UAE on their planning curriculum, and have taught a semester abroad at the Technion in Haifa, and done two short stretches at University of Auckland, New Zealand.

STUDENT ABILITIES/SUBJECT AREAS AND PERFORMANCE

Work ethic: fair. I did not get the feeling they read the material in advance, or gave adequate time for preparation of the final project.

Attendance: poor. Attendance was about 70%. I expected 95% or more from post grads. We wasted time going over material that was already covered, and then other students had gaps. This led to some frustration.

Follow directions: fair to poor inability to follow written or oral instructions, or follow through, handing in surveys, following directions on final papers, etc.

Analysis: fair to poor. There were glimmers of brilliance, but overall no evidence of sustained ability to give insights.

Writing: adequate in content, fair to poor in presentation

Team work and coordination. Poor. Final project report sections were in contradiction to one another, seems like students have seldom had to work in groups before.

GIS and manipulation of maps and spatial thinking: poor. I provided plenty of electronic materials, and nobody could seem to incorporate it into their final products.

Survey and other research skills: They appeared to have no experience here. They did pretty well after 5 trips, though. Output quantity and quality only fair.

Excel spreadsheet skills. Almost non-existent skills. As a proxy for manipulation of numbers, I also assume their math skills are either untested or likewise deficient. They showed no ability to do any forecasting, extrapolation, compounding, etc.

Power point: very rudimentary. Only one group in 4 had an adequate presentation.

Critical thinking: little evidence of their ability here.

ISSUES THAT MAY AFFECT PERFORMANCE:

1. The students are inexperienced. Can they get internships?
2. They are not sufficiently motivated to learn while at Wits.
3. They are not adequately trained before they get admitted to your program.
4. They may not be taking the right classes in your program.
5. They do not have the right content in the classes they take.
6. The depth of what is taught is not sufficient. The students need mastery of some important skills, rather than familiarity.
7. There may not be enough overlap in critical skills, projects, etc, between classes.
8. They have not had a complex, practical project. I have found these integrative projects to be excellent learning experiences.

9. They have not had remedial Excel or Power Point instruction.
10. Staff expectations on student attendance, professional behavior (timeliness), and output quantity and quality appear to be quite low.
11. I have heard that you are not permitted to take attendance in class as part of the mark. That's not good.
12. Your current student mix does not appear to have enough working, mature part-time students to imbue the appropriate work ethics to young students. Overall, your students appear to be quite young and inexperienced. I hope your efforts to attract more part timers by switching time formats to evenings is successful.
13. The block format is too short and probably does not allow proper absorption of information.
14. Your accreditation process is not rigorous enough to catch these problem areas and issues. I understand there has been a delay in the next site visit, due to issues unrelated to your program. I found our accreditation process to be very helpful in identifying gaps and suggesting strategies for improved learning. It also felt uncomfortable to change, and our staff was of mixed opinions on what was to be done.
15. Your teaching staff expertise mix (focal areas they research and teach in) needs to be broadened. I understand the need for equity, and this is a major challenge.
16. Your staff needs to have better research skills, and specifically they need Ph.D.s. This is especially important because you have a research-oriented masters program with about half the credits in the final research project. Perhaps you need more classes, and less research credit. Also, supporting staff with PhD leave and financial support would be desirable.
17. Your staff strengths seem to be over endowed in the housing area, and possibly in the planning theory area.
18. You could really use more staff expertise in finance, GIS, economics, economic development, labor, and transportation planning. These are all areas that I believe there is a need for in Johannesburg, but there may be too many niches for your program to take advantage of all of them.
19. You may want to make formal areas of specialization in Planning, such as housing, general planning, GIS, etc, which can help you attract and retain high quality students.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Switching gears, non-teaching staff support was quite good. Computer support, logistics, my office, office functions, scheduling, staff cooperation, professionalism and friendliness, etc, from Planning and BUQS staff was all at a highly satisfactory level. Thanks for that.

Also, we raised R60,000 for the project. I had a lot of difficulty getting the students paid in a timely manner. This part of the administration was unsatisfactory. While University bureaucracies everywhere are notoriously sluggish, Wits is a research University, and this is a real deterrent to bringing outside work through the University. By the end of the project (3 months plus into it) I only had one student left out of four, and as of today

nobody has been paid, to my knowledge. I have funded the research out of my personal funds, including personal loans to students. I hope that these matters will be settled by the end of my stay.

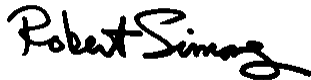
Your academic administrative culture has lots and lots and lots of staff meetings. This is very time consuming, and teaching staff appears stressed, with perhaps not enough time for research. Consider doing fewer things by consensus, and more by delegation.

Your academic culture also has a lot of very nice intellectual events. I enjoyed numerous lectures, seminars, and the North-South colloquium. This part of my Wits experience was really strong, and I attended events about subjects I knew little about, and learned a lot from them.

From a research perspective, only time will tell, but it looks like it has been a productive time. I hope to get four articles, (all co-authored with Wits teaching staff), of which 2-3 could be conference papers, plus a research report out of the experience. We have a developed a nice 200+ person data set from surveys which forms the crux of our research efforts. This data set can be expanded in the future, and the mine dumps research can also be replicated elsewhere.

To conclude, thanks for being good hosts. Overall, I had a very positive experience, and a great time. Our home life was also highly satisfactory, and my wife and young son had enriching experiences, and all the usual logistics (flat, car, etc.) were nicely organized and reasonably priced. I would like to come back to Wits again, on a regular basis, to do teaching and research.

Best wishes to all,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Simons". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Robert A. Simons, Ph.D.
Professor and Fulbright Scholar