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The Young Development Generation

Can there be a an „ideal“ development studies programme?

by Arne Wunder
London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE),
MSc Social Policy and Development student

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Arne Wunder
Frankfurter Allee 32
D-10247 Berlin

Can there be a an „ideal“ development studies programme?

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1. Introduction

Proliferation of development actors and agendas is said to be one of the pertaining problems of development policy. With EADI's forthcoming debate on *training needs for the general development practitioner* this argument appears to diffuse into debates on development training. Indeed, one could argue that the fragmented landscape of development education in Europe and worldwide can hardly achieve to train a pool of coherently skilled aid workers and policy-makers. Among other things, the Bologna process has led to a "run" on academic programmes in international development in which outputs (x number of programmes launched, y number of graduates trained) matter more than quality. There are literally hundreds of post-graduate training opportunities in Europe, with new additions every six months. Not even professional directories such as EADI's *devtrain database*[1] or *Studying Development*[2] are able to cover more than a fraction of this at times confusing range.
Another phenomenon signals that university-based development education is not necessarily a sufficient rite of passage into an aid career: Non-university trainings like the JPO/A[3] and other trainee programmes of aid agencies, ODI's Fellowship Programme[4] and the German Development Institute's post-graduate training course[5] tend to offer the very best career prospects for young graduates. This indicates that academic programmes in international development may have deficits in their practice-orientation which need to be addressed.

In spite of these relevant arguments I will, from a student's perspective, argue the following:

- (1) Mixing everything from wish lists into idealised, generalist post-graduate programmes will likely dilute their quality.
- (2) Better market-orientation of development education is indeed often needed. But a system which simply produces for the demand of aid agencies will only reproduce existing development "fads" and shortcomings.
- (3) Standardising development curricula is likely to contribute to a new development conformity and false orthodoxy. Instead, overarching qualifications ("meta skills") such as international experience and critical self-reflection may be a bridge between diverse fields of development studies.
- (4) The fragmentation of development programmes in Europe is not problematic because there are too many programmes, but because prospective students cannot make fully use of them. There is need for a systematic and independent mapping of the educational landscape.
- (5) Development education and research in non-Anglophone countries like Germany tends to focus narrowly on their domestic markets; better acknowledgement of international debates and theories can potentially contribute to more comprehensive, up-to-date and therefore relevant development training.
- (6) Providing good development education is not only about curricular issues: Training providers need to further address structural issues like self-contained academic recruitment policies and lack of funding opportunities for overseas work and research stays.

[1] http://www.eadi.org
[2] http://www.studying-development.org/
[3] http://www.jposc.org/
[4] http://www.odi.org.uk/fellows/index.html
[5] http://www.die-gdi.de/die_homepage.nsf/FSeaus?OpenFrameset

2. Mixing everything from wish lists into idealised, generalist post-graduate programmes will likely dilute their quality

The “ideal” development graduate programme would take at least four years – and is thus illusive: It would integrate economic and social theories; enable practical application at various levels (fieldwork, policy consulting); encourage critical reflection; facilitate the development of regional expertise; train language skills in at least two UN languages; and promote personal skills such as intercultural competence. Indeed, such a balanced interdisciplinary programme would be desirable. But cramming “whish lists” of any origin into one or two year Master courses will not train comprehensively-thinking generalists – rather, it is likely to produce “universal dilettantes”.

Any post-graduate curriculum will need to make some compromises and establish priorities. Just one example: A seriously organised and didactically useful work or research stay in a developing country will take at least six months (including preparation). Logically, this is very difficult to arrange for twelve-month graduate programmes, and even for most two-year ones. But if regional expertise and critical application is valued much, at what expense should such an overseas element be offered?

Quality education requires time, and given the limited timeframe of post-graduate programmes an eclectic, idealised “one size fits all” approach will not achieve the quality which is necessary for effective and learning aid.

There is at least one implication of this observation: Meaningful post-graduate development education requires a good foundation – i.e. substantive undergraduate studies. We shall not separate these two from each other.

3. “He who pays the piper calls the tune”: The dangers of aid-driven development education

For training providers, aid agencies and students alike it is tempting to see development education as a market in which demand and supply should be perfectly matched. But authors like Easterly remind us that aid actors tend to form a “Cartel of good intentions” (Easterly 2002) in which output and symbolic representation matters more than actual quality. Aid agencies are primarily interested in functioning, doing and representing – but not necessarily in delivering quality. They have an interest in graduates who integrate smoothly into their established practices. Thus, for the sake of aid effectiveness, educational “wish lists” prescribed by aid agencies are not always a wise criterion to follow.

For many development education programmes there is indeed a need for better market-orientation. Programmes which are simply antagonistic to aid practices will be unable to influence, and potentially improve them – besides doing their graduates no real favour. But curricula solely geared towards the demand of the job market will give away the main power of science: its ability for critical reflection and empirically driven innovation. Development is more than aid – a wisdom students should not forget on their way into the job market.

After having studied in three very different academic environments [a) critical theory; b) applied policy studies; and c) a mixture of both] “ideal” seems to me a balance between educating development *actors* and *observers*. I will give one example: In many aid agencies the logical framework approach (or logframe) is one of the key planning tools. Hence, graduates with applied knowledge of logframes will have a comparative advantage over those who have not. But unless such an applied focus is framed by a wider critical debate on the merits and limits of development planning – for instance its context specificity (which requires some regional expertise) and potential over-simplicity (“lock frames”) such education will provide a narrow understanding of development as “aid toolboxes”. Critically observing aid practices is not just a goal in itself – it will also enable students to potentially improve these modalities.

In short: Development education needs to find a balance between market-orientation and critical distance – it should not just train the use of wish lists and toolboxes prescribed by aid agencies.

4. A plea for development “meta skills”

For a number of reasons, standardising development “hard skills” (i.e. the “technical” core contents of educational programmes) is unlikely to be a good response to the pressing deficits of aid practices. However, I posit that development graduates from any field would greatly benefit from a different common denominator: *Meta skills*, which would combine necessary tangible competencies (“hard skills”) such as developing country experience, knowledge of languages and evaluation methods with a personal

attitude towards their subject (“soft skills”), i.e. intercultural sensitivity and the ability to critically reflect their own role and actions.

I have already pled for a sceptical view of practice-driven development education. Simply selling transferable, practical skills like logframes or PRAs techniques will only reproduce existing development “fads” – with all their inherent shortcomings and biases. This will neither do development students nor aid performance a great favour: Aid approaches popular today are likely to be out of fashion tomorrow, leaving graduates with “obsolete” knowledge. But more importantly, a passionate belief in particular development approaches combined with a lack of willingness or ability to assess how they are working out in practice has cemented aid as a “Cartel of good intentions” (Easterly 2002).

Indeed, aligning development “hard skills” through standardised curricula makes graduates’ knowledge more comparable and predictable. Again, employers are likely to favour this approach as they typically prefer graduates who comply with their established modes of doing aid. But calibrating development curricula towards producing general aid practitioners will also lead to a new conformity, to an “ideological” and methodological closure which would not reflect the complexity of development. Students do indeed need thorough knowledge of state-of-the-art tools – but also the ability to criticise them, go beyond them, and improve them.

Precisely this reflectivity is a central example of the benefits of meta skills. Development meta skills, I argue, integrate overarching “hard” and “soft” skills *and enable future professionals to make “good” use of their technical core qualification* (economics, social policy, engineering etc.). Such skills could establish quality standards between various specialised degree programmes while at the same time maintaining technical plurality.

As the quest for any kind of standards is normative, it is debatable what kind of common meta skills future development professionals should possess (for a recent example see Woolcock 2007). Drawing on my personal experience the following is a non-exhaustive list of examples which could serve as starting point for further debate:

- (a) Modes of enquiry: Development professionals need to learn approaches how to keep in touch with the reality of aid. This contains not only monitoring and evaluation tools but basic quantitative and qualitative skills. Professional (in contrast to intuitive) sampling and interview skills, for example, are essential for getting good data. Learning to be good “detectives” (Woolcock 2007) and to find out what works, what not, and why, also implies a sceptical attitude to look behind and beyond commonly prescribed aid formulas – and thus includes a dimensions of “soft” skills.

- (b) Developing country experience: Although it may sound obvious, it is not just international experience which matters (which can be comfortably gained through interning with prestigious institutions in Washington DC, Geneva, New York or Tokyo), but developing country experience. At least in Germany, students from many development programmes can still graduate without any meaningful work or research experience in developing countries. This is not only a paradox; it also perpetuates aid as an imagined, remote, desk-based exercise. Aid generalists without regional expertise will easily ignore regional differences, divergences and specificities.
  Universities should not continue to conveniently “outsource” this essential educational element by simply encouraging their students to find internships in developing countries; often students merely chose project offices of large bi- or multilateral donors and never really immerse into their environments. Instead, universities should much more actively engage in the provision of didactically framed, meaningful developing country experience, for instance through guided practice projects.

- (c) Languages: Learning languages is an effective way of improving career prospects and individual performance at the same time. Many field jobs now require languages other than English; the same even applies to domestic work with large multi- and bilateral donors, which often require proficiency in two UN languages. Even more importantly, being competent in local

languages also improves the ability of linking with the “grassroots”. At the moment however, obtaining language skills is often left to the individual commitment of students.

- (d) Self-reflectivity: Development professionals are typically trained as “doers”. Since aid comes with a benevolent flair of doing good, aid workers are not normally encouraged to criticise the effectiveness of their own doing and the institutions which contribute to it. Yet sceptical self-enquiry is essential for learning about and improving effectiveness. The current division of action (i.e. the domain of aid agencies) and analysis (confined to academia) limits aid actors to learn from within. Admittedly it is yet to debate what self-reflectivity could actually mean and how it could be achieved through education and training – but it could potentially be central to achieving better, more responsive aid.

5. Obstacles to making informed career choices

As should have been clear by now, the existing variety of specialised degree programs has its merits. I argue that the proliferating range of training opportunities is not the real problem. What is really lacking are opportunities for prospective students to navigate through this confusing range and to make informed career choices. The landscape of development education is not yet systematically explored and comparatively explained, for instance in books or journals. Often anecdotal, piecemeal self-presentations are the only source of information on educational programmes. Professional directories such as EADI’s *devtrain database* and *Studying Development* fail to cover more than a fraction and to present independent background information and assessments.

6. A plea for more international openness

It is a well-known yet hardly admitted fact: Development research and education in large, non-Anglophone European countries like Germany, France and Spain tends to operate in closed-circles, producing for their relatively large domestic markets. One of the many symptoms of this tradition is that universities rarely invest in subscriptions of international journals. This does certainly not mean that non-Anglophone research and education is less important or valuable; but students being trained in such academic peninsulas often lack access to up-to-date debates and theories from the much larger “international”, i.e. Anglophone market.

Throughout Europe, development training institutes need to invest in international openness, i.e. by recruiting staff from different academic backgrounds (including those from developing countries!), and by maintaining international research and policy networks to engage in cutting-edge debates.

7. Structural issues: it’s not just about curricula

Educational engineering is not just about the curriculum. Training providers need to acknowledge the wider structural determinants of sound development formation: (a) Academic recruitment policies, (b) teaching incentives, and (c) funding opportunities for overseas work and research.

(a) Academic recruitment policies: University-based education outside Anglophone countries tends to happen at departmental level, and is, thus, rarely trans-disciplinary. One example: Students of economics in Germany will likely receive a more or less thorough training in macro- and microeconomics, but will rarely have the chance to study, for instance, the complexity of social development. In contrast, countries like USA and the United Kingdom have long-established traditions of Schools of Development Studies (or at least of public policy) that are *potentially* able to offer “special interest programmes” (and thus avoid the dangers of superficial generalist programmes) that are linked to diverse, trans-disciplinary pools of teaching staff. In my opinion, cross-departmental recruitment of researchers and practitioners with a varying degree of practical engagement is essential to achieve a balanced and practical yet thorough coverage of diverse development issues.

(b) Teaching incentives: In many European university systems the provision of quality education typically depends on individually committed teachers. Performance incentives for good and innovative

development education will be necessary to address an easily occurring output focus in development education (x number of programmes launched, y number of graduates trained).

(c) Funding opportunities: Given the widespread lack of remunerated internships as well as of scholarships for overseas work or research it is difficult for financially less able students to get (international) work experience. Yet such experience is an essential key qualification for the job market as well as for personal development. Universities and aid agencies have yet to find innovative approaches to provide financially stable and didactically meaningful work and research experience especially in developing countries.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be fair to assert that there is no “ideal” development studies programme – and that there should not be. The existing diversity of development training opportunities is appropriate to address the complexity of development issues. In order to better understand and even influence (and potentially improve) aid practices development education needs to maintain in close contact with market demands. But at the same training providers should aim for a critical distance to the aid industry. Streamlining development curricula may increase market-compliance, comparability and predictability of development graduates, but will, moreover, likely contribute to a new conformity and ideological/methodological closure. Meta skills such as developing country experience and critical self-reflection are able to form a common denominator within the community of development professionals, and may be an epistemological bridge between various fields of development education. Further, it is necessary to independently explore and explain the landscape of development education in a much better way to enable students to make informed career choices. Lastly, structural determinants beyond curricular issues need to be considered and improved.

Many of these issues need be debated and tackled cooperatively and in a continuous and systematic manner. Being the association of European Development (Research and) Training Institutes, EADI would be a very appropriate forum for doing so – for instance in its Working Group on Co-operation in Development and Area Studies Training.

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About the author

Arne Wunder (arne.wunder@ep-nachwuchs.de) has taken development courses at three European universities (two of them EADI members). He recently completed his MSc in Social Policy and Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Before coming to the LSE, Arne has worked with the Word Bank’s Social Development Department, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and GTZ. Further, he was ecumenical volunteer in a Namibian township and has done field research on the ambiguous effects of democratic decentralisation on local conflict in Orissa, India. At the moment, he is preparing the launch of www.ep-nachwuchs.de, an information portal for the young development generation.