Planetary Urbanisation: Global Challenges in a Changing World

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The nature and form of urbanisation is rapidly changing. New cities form while others decline; urban development increases economic opportunities for some but challenges quality of life for others. This course focuses on planetary urbanisation, the idea that whether living in cities or not, most of the world’s 7 billion people are impacted by the processes of urbanisation. The core question addressed during this five-week course is:

What challenges does planetary urbanisation present for cities in different geographical settings?

To address the core question we explore the following:
- What is urbanisation?
- What is planetary urbanisation?
- What are some of the challenges facing cities around the world today?
- What might future cities look like?

In the course students will be asked to consider how contemporary planetary urbanisation is different? How are we responding to global urban challenges? Will future cities be more liveable?

Learning outcomes
By the end of this course, students should be able to:
- Discuss important urban challenges facing societies globally;
- Explain ‘planetary urbanisation’ and how it differs from historic forms of urbanisation;
- Discuss whether planetary urbanisation is in action in their “home city”;
- Articulate how urban experiences are differentiated across space and time;
- Demonstrate the value, and appreciate the importance, of intercultural learning.

Course structure
This course is delivered over 5 weeks and should take approximately 2-3 hours per week to complete. You will be asked to watch videos, complete readings, engage in discussion, and apply the ideas introduced to your own city and others. No prior knowledge of geography, sociology or urban studies is required.

A detailed syllabus is provided overleaf.
Week 1: Urbanisation and the ‘ideal city’

It is estimated that a majority of the world’s population now live in cities and the proportion is growing day by day. Yet, urbanisation is a relatively recent part of the story of humanity and the earliest evidence of towns dates back little more than 5,000 years. What happened to begin the process of turning countryside dwellers into city dwellers is destined always to remain a matter of conjecture – there are no records, not even myths. In this section of the course we will examine the dominant theory – that of a surplus. The idea is that a surplus in food production allowed people to be freed to undertake specialised tasks and that this ultimately allowed or required people to live in towns and cities. There are problems with this idea, though! Recent as urban living is, the notion of planning towns as a single cohesive entity is even more recent. The Romans had a model for colonial towns and the Chinese felt it important that towns should reflect the order and harmony of the cosmos. The Renaissance in European produced many ideas about how ideal cities should look but mainly from an aesthetic and architectural perspective only. It took until the nineteenth century before the focus turned to whether there were good ways to organise urban life. Inevitably, this involved the question as to whether the best cities for living also needed to have a particular spatial form. There were lots of ideas about this and will explore some in this week.

Week 2 – An Urban Future? Planetary Urbanisation

The term urbanisation is used in two distinct but related ways. The first refers to the shift in population from rural to urban environments where most are not occupied with agricultural production; currently, over 50% of the global population (>3.5 bn) lives in urban areas. The second is the landscape transformation (roads, buildings, paving, etc.) that is associated with urban activities; it is estimated that less than 3% of the available land area is urbanized. Building these urban areas and sustaining the population and functions that occupy them require a continuous flow of people, materials, food, energy, water, etc. Initially, these resources were largely acquired from the surrounding area however as cities have grown so has the extent of their reach. Now, these exchanges occur on a planetary scale, linking cities to distant places and resources. In many respects, the human drivers of global planetary change are closely associated with the magnitude and intensity of urbanisation and their interconnectedness. Cities, by definition, cannot be sustainable but they are central to achieving global sustainability. Future cities in the future could be designed to allow a more efficient use of resources, to improve living conditions and more equitable distribution of resources. This week’s material focusses on the geographical outcomes of historical urbanisation at global and local scales and prospects for the cities of the future.

Week 3: Urban Challenge - Housing and Shelter

As we have become increasingly urbanized: the provision of adequate and affordable housing and shelter has become a pressing issue. This week we explore the challenge of where we will live? Some writers have argued that we are rapidly moving towards a planet of slums (Davis, 2004) and that the challenge of providing affordable, decent housing is relevant right across the Global North and South. We begin by taking a global perspective to identify a global crisis of housing adequacy
and affordability. We will look at regional differences in the crisis and examine varying responses to demand for housing. We conclude by looking at one of the most controversial trends in urban housing - the emergence of gentrification. At the same time as many urban residents struggle to find suitable and affordable shelter, speculators and financiers use the housing market as a speculative economic tool. We examine the operation and impact of gentrification in a variety of locations globally and ask students to think about how this might be evident in their own city.

**Week 4: Urban Challenge - Health and Wellbeing**

Following on from last week’s focus on the role that housing and shelter play in shaping the urban experience and indeed the very structure of cities, this week we look at another challenge of urbanisation, how cities shape our overall wellbeing in terms of our physical health and our physical security. A range of ideas about public health and security in cities will be introduced. You will be asked to relate these ideas to your own personal experiences or the nature of the cities you are most familiar with. In the first section of this week’s material, we explore how the development of cities has had a direct and far-reaching impact on the physical health of their inhabitants, using the importance of providing clean water in Hong Kong as an example. Then we discuss aspects of our physical security, looking at crime and social control, how these issues are distributed across different urban settings, and the impact this has on different sections of the public.

**Week 5 - The Future of Cities / Future Cities**

This week focuses on the future urban world. We begin by looking at some historic examples of “future thinking” in cities. The second section examines the potential for cities to become more sustainable by better managing their level of resource use and waste generation. This will require changes to urban design (e.g. higher-density settlements), behavior (e.g. energy demand) and technological innovation (e.g. renewable energy generation). This discussion is supported by materials from the C40 group of cities ([http://www.c40.org/](http://www.c40.org/)). Already technology is re-shaping how we design, manage and live in cities. The final section of the course through a number of case studies highlights innovative ways that technology is being used to shape future cities and asks students to explore some ideas that might make their own cities more liveable.

**How can I develop my knowledge further after this course?**

In the final week, we also provide some further information on associated courses on offer in U21 institutions that complement the ideas covered in this course. You may wish to explore some of these online or through exchange opportunities between your institution and others in the network.