



Ali Memon, Great Planning Lecturer, Researcher and Winner of the New Zealand Planning Institute's Premier Award in April 2011

Alyce Melrose

In 2011 Ali Memon was awarded with the NZPI Gold Medal Award for his contribution to the planning profession. This award has only been granted three times in the last 20 years, indicating the Ali's outstanding service over the years. Alyce Melrose took the time to interview Ali about his career thus far.



Figure 1: Ali Memon with his NZPI Award 2011

Ali Memon is Professor of Environmental Management and Planning at Lincoln University and is a well recognised planning academic throughout New Zealand. Ali is a native of Kenya and from early on had an interest in geography and how people interact with the environment. Once Ali had left high school he decided to study Geography at the University of Nairobi. From there Ali transferred to the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, where he undertook postgraduate studies in Planning. A highlight from his time there was during his first year when he went on a field trip to the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States of America. This was one of the first major river basin authorities in the world. Once Ali finished his Masters he decided to do his PhD in historical economic geography on the topic of urbanisation development in colonial and post-colonial societies at the University of Western Ontario, city of London, Canada.

Once Ali had finished his PhD he secured a position as a lecturer in Urban and Regional Planning at University of Nairobi where he also had the opportunity to work on a major consulting project concerning housing for low income people in Nairobi. In 1977 Ali successfully applied for a position at Otago University in the geography department. The aim of the position was to develop a new postgraduate degree in planning. The creation of the course was successful and Ali became the Director of Master of Regional and Resource Planning until 1999. At this time he was a pioneer in New Zealand in terms of developing a broad social science approach to the teaching and researching of planning practices. Graduates of this program are now employed in senior positions within New Zealand and

overseas. In 1999 Ali was offered a Personal Chair at Lincoln University and since moving here he has taken a major role in strengthening teaching and researching in planning.

Ali has enjoyed a number of accomplishments throughout his career at both the teaching and research levels. At the teaching level he has worked as a lecturer and an examiner of undergraduate and postgraduate studies at all three of the universities that he has been employed by. At the research level Ali has enjoyed engaging with a range of other academics from throughout New Zealand and overseas, with a number of proposals in the fields of environmental planning and natural resource management. Most of these were funded by FRST (Foundation for Research, Science and Technology funding). Currently Ali's main interest is designing institutional arrangements for natural resource governance. Ali has a particular fascination with the governance of common pool resources such as water and fisheries. Another area of interest is urban planning issues in terms of urban growth management. At present Ali is working on issues of poverty and affordable housing in Kenya and in New Zealand with his research focusing on institutional arrangements for urban growth management in Auckland and Christchurch.

Ali views New Zealand as being an excellent place to study planning and gain an understanding of how to address planning issues. He believes this because although the country is relatively small it still has a diverse range of environments, issues, and problems. New Zealand has also adopted a number of innovative approaches addressing environmental and resource management issues, one of these being the Quota Management System for fisheries management. However Ali feels that there are major challenges facing New Zealand Planners, for example how to promote greater sustainability in urban and rural communities. This includes the issues of biculturalism, changing ingrained attitudes and lifestyles, and reprioritising the outcomes that we want to achieve through development.

Ali sees planning as an important academic discipline at universities both nationally and internationally. The significant growth of planning journals reflects the growth of interest in planning research, emphasising the importance of the discipline. Ali feels that planning is a key discipline in translating knowledge into action and as a pathway to sustainability. A key challenge for planning academics is to undertake research and to design courses that can achieve the objective of sustainability outcomes. On one hand these need to maintain a sense of idealism but at the same time they need to be aware of what can be achieved realistically. Ali sees Lincoln as having a key role to play in promoting planning through its teaching and research programs. Compared to other universities Lincoln has a strong multi-disciplinary approach to planning. This is due to having a wide expertise across a range of social and biophysical science disciplines and a longstanding focus on environmental issues. Ali feels that research funding for young academics is a major hurdle, but is pleased to see that the Faculty of Environment, Society and Design have worked hard to respond to these concerns in recent years.

Over the last few years permanent planning positions, as well as part-time and summer work have become hard to find. Ali feels this is due to the planning profession being closely

related to the economic cycle. Ali values the support of the Canterbury branch of NZPI (New Zealand Planning Institute) in helping students to locate work opportunities. Ali always encourages Lincoln students to become members of NZPI, which has free student membership at the branch level, and is a tremendous way to network with other professionals.

When students graduate from Lincoln University, Ali encourages them to aim for jobs in planning as well as planning related areas such as health and transport. This is because the knowledge and skills that Lincoln graduates acquire are relevant to a diverse range of employment situations and opportunities. Ali also encourages students to consider postgraduate study of any kind, so that they have a chance of attaining a better position in the workforce. While at university Ali also recommends that students work overseas. Some Lincoln graduates go over to Australia or the United Kingdom for practical experience which helps them enormously when they get back to New Zealand. Ali has been on the Lincoln Planning Review permanent editorial board since the publications inception. He shares his belief that students who participate in voluntary activities such as the Lincoln University Planning Association (LUPA) or the Lincoln Planning Review or attending environment court hearings, will only add to their knowledge of planning and the skills that they will acquire will be valuable when they enter into the planning industry.

Ali is very chuffed to see how the Lincoln Planning Review has developed and become a flagship for Lincoln.