



Performing without a script

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Method

- 58 key informant interviews, exploring quality dimensions of impact assessment
- For SIA practitioners: how did they learn, what were they reading at the time, their experiences
- Audit of all impact assessments in the Northern Territory looked at social, cultural and participative components; qualifications of those doing the studies
- Consultancies from around Australia, so results can be generalised to some extent

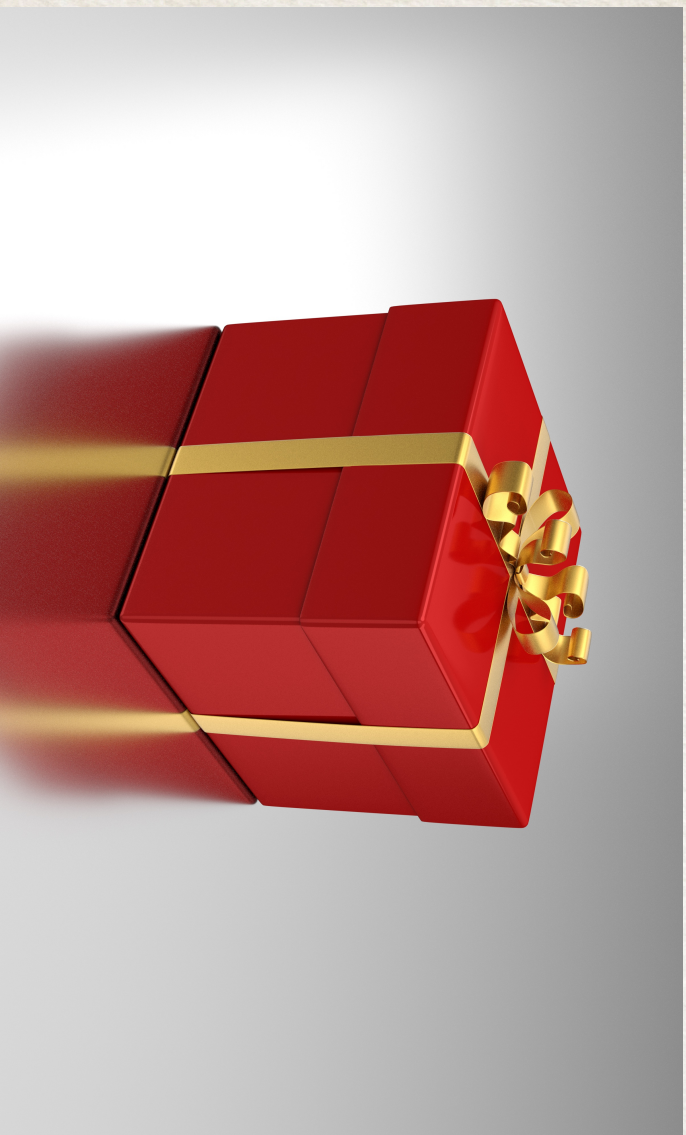


The burning questions

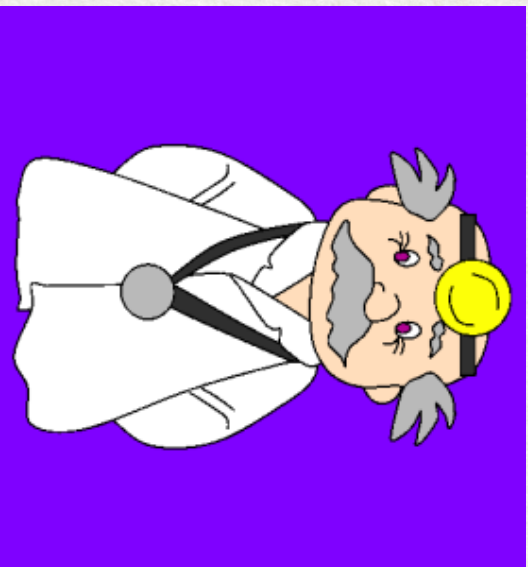
- What is a social impact assessment practitioner’?
- Says who?
- Should the bar be set at expert witness status?
- How do we assess quality – or professional reliance?



We judge a product by its cover



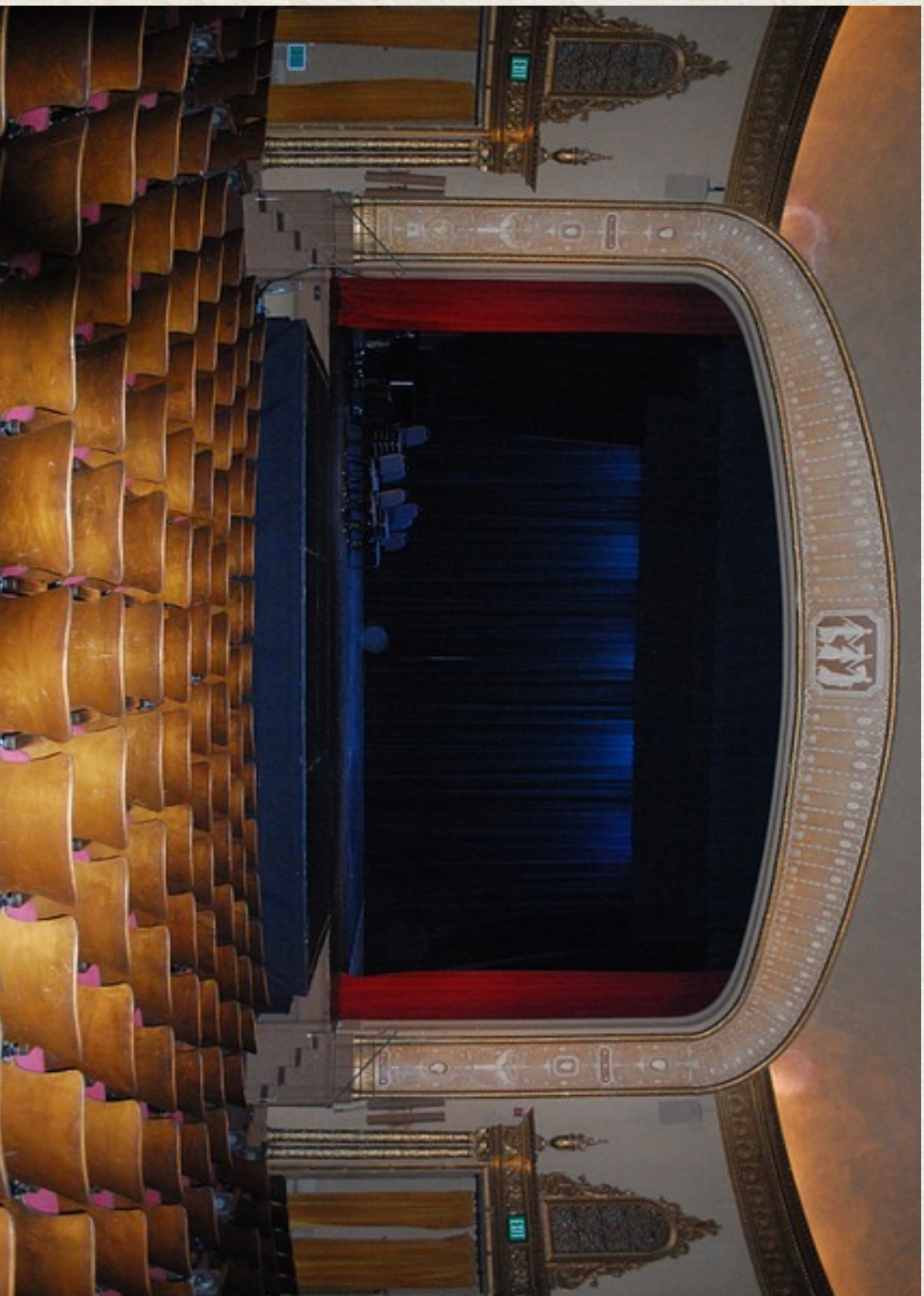
We judge a service by tangible
evidence of quality: that the service
will be delivered as described



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Services as a performance



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Backstage

- trained actors
- playwright, scripts
- rehearsals
- stage direction
- operating procedures
- lighting, sets
- marketing and ticket sales
- an appreciative audience



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Social impact assessment services

- are purchased by clients with no innate understanding of how the service is performed
- the audience is unclear
- there is no script



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Anyone can do social impact assessment

- Unaccredited, unregulated, interdisciplinary field
- Ad hoc system of professional reliance
- No entity ensuring practitioners keep their practice current, are held accountable to codes of ethics
- Proponents don't have to hire qualified practitioners
- Governments lack skills and resources to assess
- Inconsistent approaches, regardless of project size
- Biophysical bias: rationalist, reductionist

(McGuigan 2015, study of 36 social impact assessments in British Columbia rural areas)



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Certification and training

Importance of appropriate competencies, skills and capacity building for all impact assessment practitioners (Sadler 1996, international review of effectiveness)

“The need for professionally qualified, competent people with social science training and experience cannot be overemphasized” (Interorganizational Committee for Social Impact Assessment, 1994)

Community concern that consultants may not be suitably qualified, financially beholden to proponent, produce biased reports. Recommends code of conduct, random auditing, accreditation. (Hawke 2009, Review of the EPBC Act)

“...social impact assessment should be undertaken by appropriately trained and qualified personnel using rigorous social science methodologies” (PIA position paper 2010)



A broad Church

Interviewees' qualifications (n=19 for social impact and performance practitioners)

- environmental (x6)
- economics, arts, human geography, international studies, management, social licence, anthropology, evaluation, geology, community engagement, community development, languages, engineering, natural resource management, politics, psychology, regional planning, rural development, rural sociology, sociology, social investment, social impact

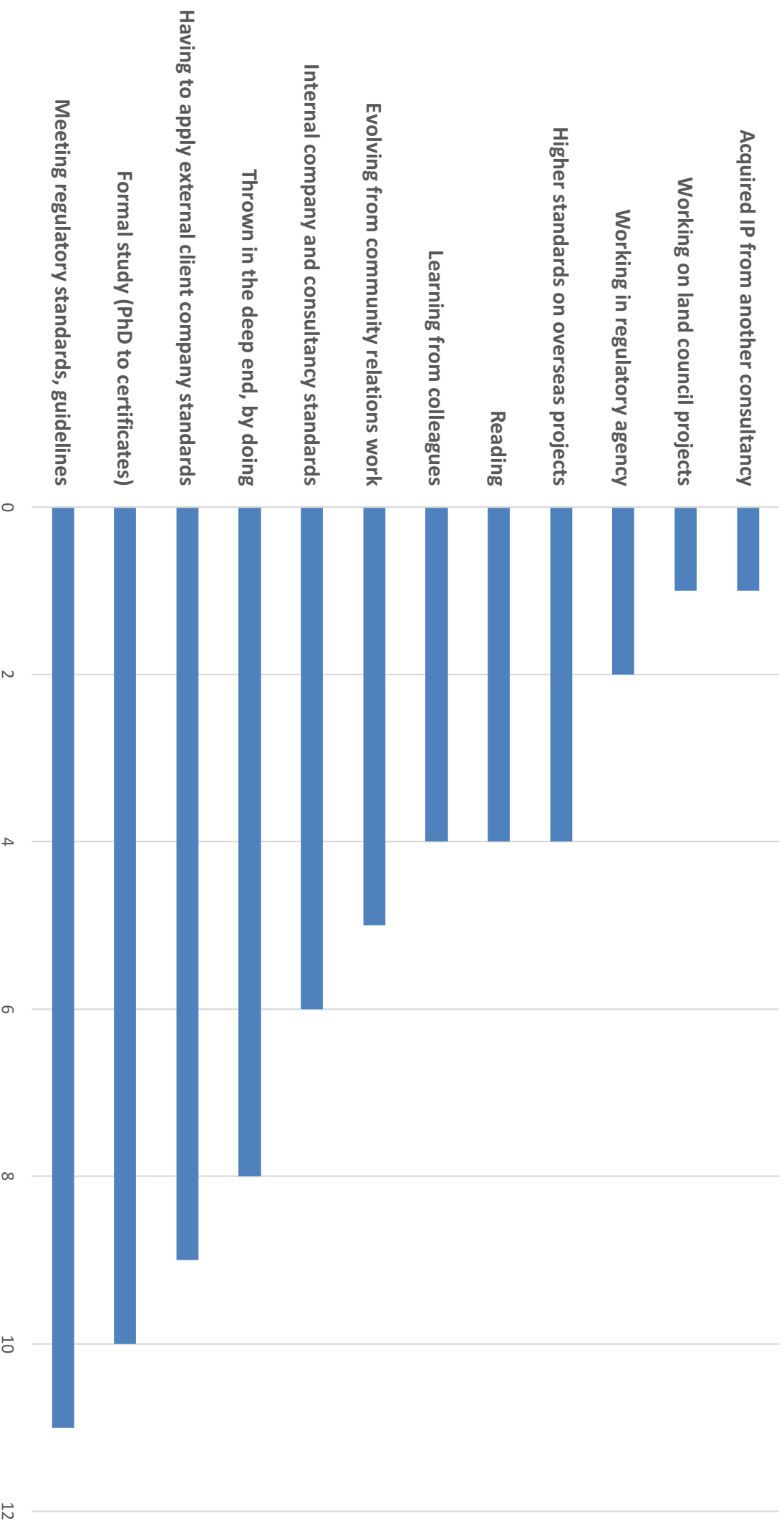


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How did practitioners learn?

Key factors in learning to do social impact assessment



How did they learn?

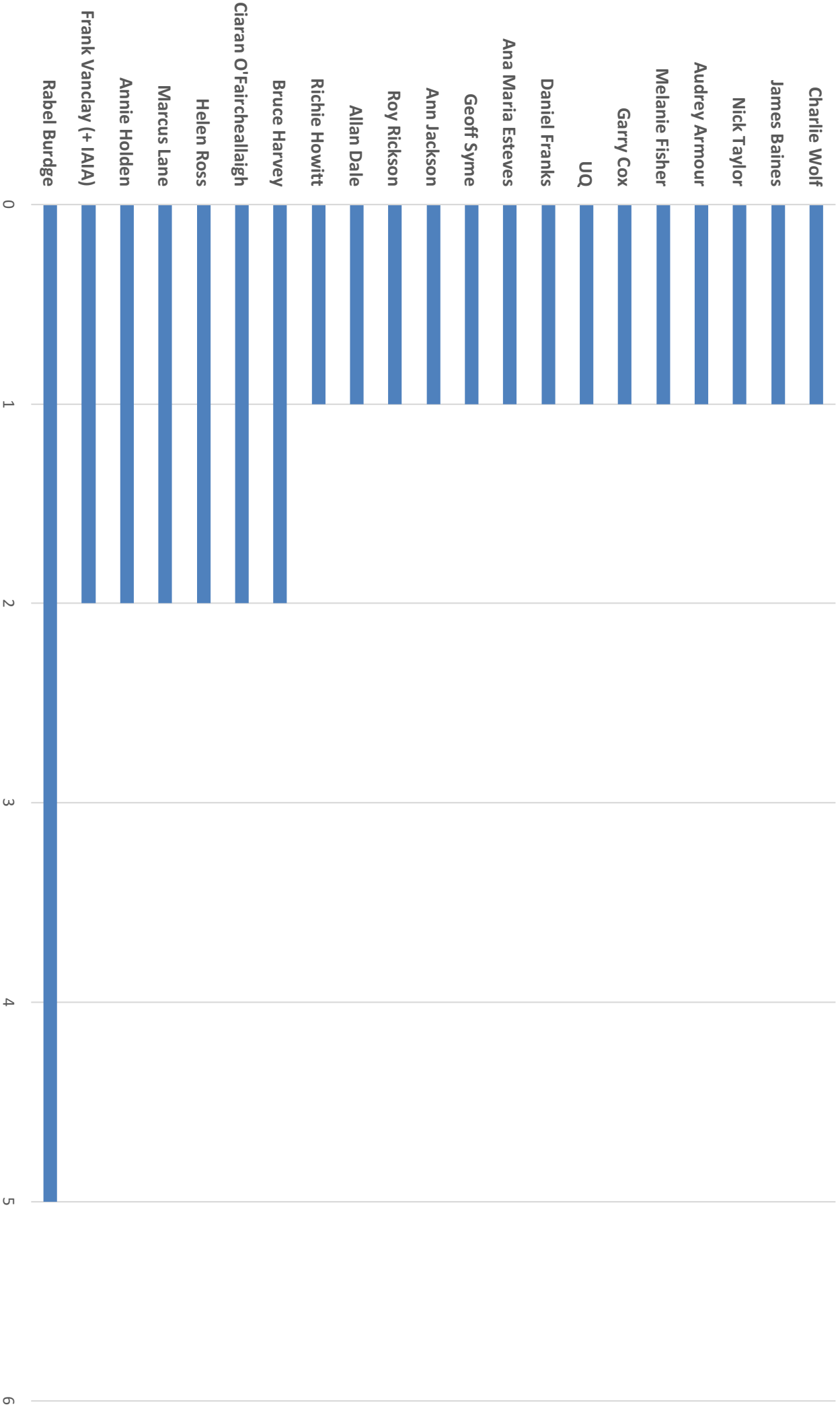
"I was brand new to the profession and without a lot of experience, I did that without a lot of guidance..."

"Now, I was very green. And, in hindsight, I wasn't the expert... but it forced me into a position where I actually read, read, read a lot of material. I spoke to a lot of people. And I really was forced to learn that way."

"I guess it was just a trial and error approach. Afterwards I found things in books... chucked in the deep end... made it up as I went..."

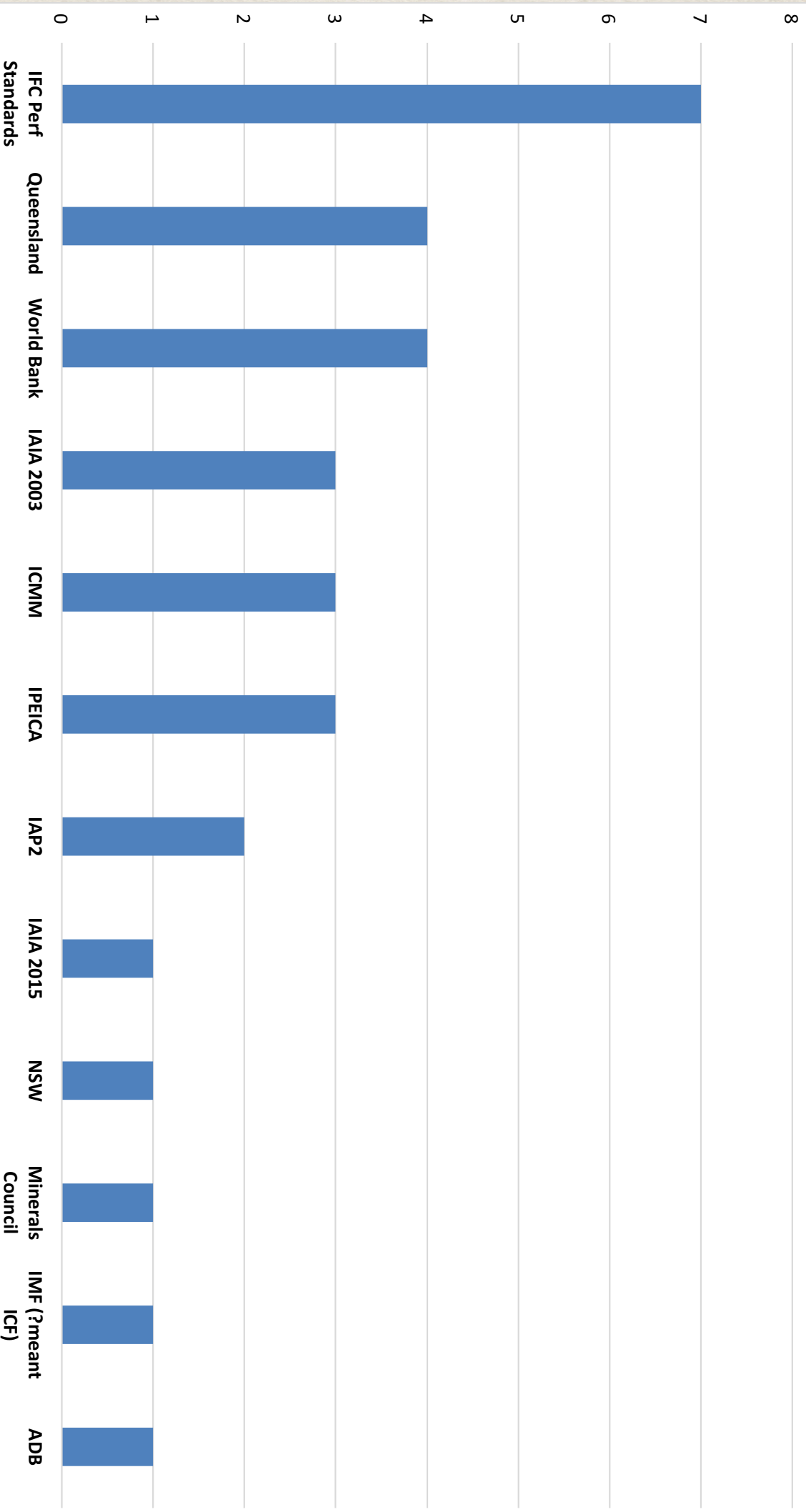
"An engineering company advertised for a social scientist... I didn't have any training... I was very green and more or less thrown in the deep end... was given professional training but learnt by just doing it and being given the opportunity..."

What were they reading to learn?



What standards were influential?

Guidelines cited



What issues were raised in interviews?

- no yardstick by which to judge good practice or ethical body from which to be expelled
- learning by floundering (only one had SIA training when they started)
- the importance of good clients
- biophysical dominates, social is filtered
- cyclical fortunes = loss of experience in every downturn
- higher standards overseas (eg IFC, Canada, PNG), oil and gas industry, multinational mining companies
- decline of standards with impact assessment 'sausage machine', 'cookie cutter'
- contest with public affairs approaches to social performance



What did people suggest?

- accreditation, but unsure how and by whom
- better trained regulators: the best chance to influence quality is when it's mandated and enforced throughout the project life cycle
- proponents value efficiency, influenced by guidelines, fear of not getting approved
- build a community of practice with a broader focus (IAIA definition of social impacts of policies, programs and projects covers a broader field, not just impact assessment)
- skills include: community engagement, meaningful use of statistics, rigorous social science research, impact assessment
- the business case is risk-based: reducing the cost of conflict, minimising delays, reputation, sustainability reporting
- library of good studies, many practitioners and lecturers are retiring, case studies: the good, the bad and the 'train wrecks'



Conclusion

- SIA emerges from this study as an unregulated, interdisciplinary field with no code of ethics and no association covering practitioners.
- Practitioners bring a rich diversity of backgrounds to their work but are largely self-taught, few have formal qualifications in SIA.
- But highly motivated, passionate about their work and want standards raised.
- Requires clear competencies, appropriate qualifications, skills and aptitude, a pipeline of work, reward systems.



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