

Social impact assessment (SIA) certification status and options to introduce certification by 2020

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Issue

There is currently wide variety in the backgrounds, skills levels and qualifications of SIA practitioners and in the quality of social impact assessments (SIAs) being prepared. A need for professional certification for SIA practitioners has been identified among many of those practitioners. This briefing note proposes a process to develop a recognised and respected certification system.

Background

Accreditation is the process of ensuring courses of study are of a sufficiently high level to produce the skills needed within a profession. Certification is given to practitioners who demonstrate compliance with agreed standards of competency. In short – courses are accredited and practitioners are certified.

Many professional disciplines use certification to recognise the qualifications and proficiency of practitioners and to regulate competencies and consistency of standards. In Australia, for example, the Certified Environmental Practitioner Scheme (CEnvP) offers certification for environmental professionals and the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) runs a Registered Planner certification process. PIA also oversees professional accreditation of tertiary level courses.

There is no certification currently available for social impact assessment (SIA) practitioners in Australia. This is partly attributable to the many disciplines from which practitioners come (eg. social sciences, environmental sciences, planning, engagement, cultural heritage¹), and the small numbers of tertiary institutions offering SIA coursework and qualifications². Two SIA practitioners have CEnvP Impact Assessment certification and other SIA practitioners have the general CEnvP certification. However the general level has no specific provision for the social research skills required in SIA and is not founded on a social science approach.

In turn, absence of some form of certification for SIA practitioners can lead to a credibility deficit, or a lack of trust, in relation to the work they produce. Good SIA practitioners are unable to point to a

¹ A 2017 EIANZ SIA Working Group survey (Umwelt, 2018) found that the 34 respondents to an online survey of SIA practitioner experience held qualifications from 11 different fields of study. Most common was 'business and economics' (5 respondents), followed by 3 respondents from each of the six fields of: (Human) geography; Environmental science, law, management and planning; Arts; Sociology and anthropology; Political studies and public policy; and Social planning, community development. Other fields of qualification included Communications; Town planning, urban and built environment; Management; and Psychology.

² Macquarie University offers a Graduate Certificate and a Graduate Diploma in Social Impact Assessment; University of Queensland offers a Social Impact Assessment: applied social research and development course for both undergraduates and graduates and, in the past, has offered an online Social Impact Assessment training course (with Frank Vanclay and Ana Maria Esteves) through its Sustainable Minerals Institute; RMIT offers a graduate level Social Impact Assessment and Community Engagement course. University of Melbourne offers a graduate level Social Impact Assessment and Evaluation course. The Crawford School of Public Policy at ANU offers a graduate course in Social Impact Assessment: Theory and Methods. Griffith University offers a graduate level course in Public Participation and Social Impact Assessment.

trusted body to guarantee the integrity of their work and the veracity of their findings, leaving their professionalism open to question.

Recognition of competency is also critical at a time where there has been additional recognition of the importance of quality SIA in the planning and assessment process, following the NSW Land and Environment Court decision to refuse approval of the Rocky Hill coal mine, largely on the basis that social impacts were not properly considered³. This case highlights the potential for legal risk for regulators and practitioners if SIA is found to be inadequate in environmental impact assessments.

The NSW SIA Guideline⁴ sets out expectations for the qualifications and skills of practitioners preparing a SIA for assessment by the Department of Planning & Environment (now Department of Planning, Industry and Environment). In addition, the Queensland government mandates SIAs for all projects subject to an environmental impact statement (EIS), and the Northern Territory government will soon require that a SIA is prepared by a suitably qualified, registered practitioner.

Several SIA networks, such as EIANZ SIA Working Group, have explored accreditation / certification options for SIA practitioners over the years, but little firm progress has been made.

Current situation

Preliminary discussions with the EIANZ SIA Working Group, PIA and University of Queensland, and with fellow practitioners at recent IAIA and EIANZ Conferences⁵, have elicited strong support for certification. Several possible models through which training and certification could be offered have been suggested.

Some of the key issues that would need to be resolved include:

- What represents an adequate qualification and level of experience?
- What essential skills need to be demonstrated by practitioners?
- What additional training can be sourced, if necessary, to bring more practitioners up to the necessary level?
- What institutions are willing and able to offer such training courses?
- How likely are practitioners to access this additional training?
- What are the options and processes involved in getting one or more professional associations to offer formal accreditation for SIA courses and certification for practitioners, once skill levels and qualifications have been demonstrated?
- What costs might be involved, both in establishing and managing a certification framework, and for practitioners themselves?

The status of each of these issues is summarised below.

Qualifications and experience – Practitioners come to SIA from a wide range of backgrounds and careers. Most practitioners have some, but not all, of the key skills needed to demonstrate an understanding of the matters and principles necessary to research and prepare a high standard SIA.

³ Gloucester Resources Limited v Minister for Planning [2019] NSW Land and Environment Court (NSWLEC) 7

⁴ NSW Planning & Environment, *Social impact assessment guideline for State significant mining, petroleum production and extractive industry development*, September 2017.

⁵ International Association of Impact Assessment (IAIA) International Conference, Brisbane, 27-28 April, 2019; EIANZ Annual Conference, Sydney, 1-2 November, 2018.

Demonstration of skills – Many practitioners feel confident in undertaking SIAs, yet the quality of engagement and assessments or style of documents produced does not demonstrate a clear understanding of, or compliance with, the standards outlined in current best practice guidelines. Certification needs to ensure a practitioner can demonstrate adherence to the accepted principles of quality SIAs. Consideration may be needed for different ‘levels’ of certification (e.g. registered SIA practitioner vs fully certified SIA practitioner)

Additional training needs – With the wide range of qualifications and backgrounds, there is great variability across practitioners in their training needs. Some might need training in community engagement or fieldwork, others in qualitative research or social science methods, others in ethics or sustainability. The greatest demand for training appears to be targeted courses that could assist in lifting practitioners’ existing skills and filling gaps in knowledge. Short courses are also likely to be more practical and within reach of qualified practitioners.

Interested educational institutions - There is an opportunity for institutions offering existing SIA courses at the degree or post-graduate degree level to be accredited, and for them to also develop ‘micro-qualifications’ or short courses, suitable for accreditation by bodies such as EIANZ and PIA. The University of Queensland (UQ) has expressed interest in being involved in offering such courses. Other university courses, such as Macquarie University’s post-graduate SIA courses, could also be considered suitable for accreditation by EIANZ and PIA. On-line options, or partnerships with other institutions (such as offered by University of Strathclyde / Community Insights) may be developed in parallel and accredited over time.

Likely take up rates – If requirements for competency and certification are adopted across several states and territories, there will be a need for practitioners to ensure skills are commensurate with best practice. There could be a requirement for annual training, or regular updates. Further thought is required around expected demand for courses and which would be in greatest demand / need.

Accreditation / Certification bodies –Preliminary discussions with PIA and with CEnvP have confirmed interest in extending this to the practice of SIA. These two organisations offer different models – PIA accredits the training process, while CEnvP certifies practitioners. Both are open to working to develop and adopt a scheme.

Costs – No discussions have included costs so far. It is likely that, once a model is agreed, some costs will be incurred in establishing the scheme in practice. Further costs are likely to be involved in managing it. To meet these costs, a pricing model will be needed, with the expectation that practitioners seeking certification will pay some fee. As a guide, the CEnvP Scheme charges a \$665 application fee and \$545 annually for a CEnvP Impact Assessment Specialist.

There therefore appears to be a recognised need and willingness amongst practitioners within government, tertiary education, professional associations / certification bodies and private practitioners, to work collaboratively to progress certification of SIA professionals. Such a task will require time commitments from each of these agencies. However, the issues to be decided are not insurmountable and it would seem that a workable model, or a couple of options, could be agreed through a ½ day working session.

The upcoming EIANZ Conference in November 2019 offers an opportunity to bring together government, academic, consultant and other SIA practitioners with a knowledge of certification processes, to agree on appropriate qualifications and experience standards, training needs and certification agencies, so that certification can be offered by 2020.

Proposed actions

A workshop is proposed to be organised in association with the upcoming EIANZ Conference in Adelaide in November. Specialists would be invited and other interested practitioners could participate, to work through and confirm the issues identified above (and others), so that a practical process is developed that will enable certification to be offered from mid-2020.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- A workshop be held to obtain agreement on the best approach to the training, certification and professional development of SIA practitioners
- Date and place of the workshop to be determined but ideally in association with the EIANZ Conference in Adelaide, 4-6 November, 2019
- Participants to be invited across a range of disciplines and institutions relevant to the needs and scope of achieving certification
- Prior to the workshop, several brief issues papers be prepared for circulation to attendees.
- Desired outcome is a pathway to achieving certification for SIA practitioners from 2020.

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