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Reflections on impact assessment research scholarship from editor and academic perspectives

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Abstract

Reflections on impact assessment research scholarship are presented drawn from our experiences as journal editors and academics with respect to the nature of impact assessment research and the quality of impact assessment research writing. We support the call for more empirical impact assessment research studies, especially large and longer-term studies. While the international field of impact assessment research is healthy overall, we would like to see better international and multi-disciplinary collaboration. We also urge careful attention be given by impact assessment research writers to having clear aims, robust methods accounts and to write rigorously and insightfully for the international impact assessment journal readership.

Keywords: impact assessment research; multi-disciplinary; writing skills

The aim of this paper is to respond to some of the issues raised by Fischer and Noble (2015) regarding achievements, gaps and future directions in impact assessment research. In doing so, we draw in large measure upon our own experiences and observations as editors of *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal* (IAPA) for the past six years and as researchers and supervisors of post-graduate research students alike, in the field of impact assessment. As such our methodology is grounded mainly in a reflexive approach derived from personal observations and reflections (e.g. Fox et al., 2007) along with some autobiographical elements (e.g. Campbell et al., 2004). For brevity, we are only able to cite a small number of papers as examples to support our view. Our particular focus is firstly around the nature of impact assessment research and secondly some reflections on the quality of impact assessment research writing.

Reflections on nature of impact assessment research

Exposure to hundreds of impact assessment research papers during our IAPA editorship has led us to reflect upon the nature of this research. Here we address several points. Firstly, we agree with the point made by Fischer and Noble (2015) that empirical impact assessment research studies are comparatively rare, especially large and longer-term studies. This is however, not unique to impact assessment research because funding agencies in general prefer research projects that deliver short to medium term results and are reluctant to fund basic long term empirical research. Many of the bigger studies in impact assessment we have encountered, e.g. across representative samples of practitioners, project types, jurisdictions or sectors, appear to be the domain mainly of PhD research projects, and occasionally associated with special initiatives such as the Australian Research Council funded 'centres of excellence'. While these benefit from the three or four years a PhD devotes to their study or a similar period for government funded programs, longer timeframe studies remain desirable. While impact

assessment itself tends to be a short-term but intensive activity associated with individual assessments leading up to issue of a new development approval, akin in some respects to typical impact assessment research timeframes, it would be interesting to see what sustained research of the field would reveal over a period of a decade or longer (we are not aware of any such research historically or underway). Of particular interest could be longer term research on changes in quality (i.e. reports, methods, processes, etc.), effectiveness (e.g. effects on decisions, contents of plans, performance outcomes realized etc.) and costs and benefits (direct and indirect) associated with impact assessment. We also note that we have found it difficult to attract PhD students to impact assessment research. It seems that because IA is a profession, employing many thousands of consultants, regulators and other experts in the field in our respective countries, attracting research students especially at PhD level is a challenge. The creation of a strong impact assessment profession and related industry has led to the 'practice driven' rather than 'theory driven' nature of impact assessment research, which has been highlighted by a number of authors (Jay et al, 2003; Retief 2010).

However, we both teach in specialist impact assessment oriented post-graduate programs that include a research component for student to complete; e.g. masters dissertation. This level of impact assessment research is prolific relative to PhDs. Pilcher (2011) observes relative to a PhD thesis, masters dissertations are relatively short works, the research is undertaken in a short time frame and typically there is no expectation to make an original contribution to knowledge. In other words, masters' level research is focused on research training over research publication output. Nevertheless small empirical research projects leading to publishable outcomes can be achieved, especially in shorter works such as the Professional Practice Paper (PPP) option provided for in IAPA. The context specific nature (country or case-based) of such research is a particular feature, which makes generalisation and knowledge transfer more difficult. As editors we would channel context specific research papers based upon small sample sizes or limited numbers of case studies into PPPs. Recent examples in IAPA include interviews with 22 practitioners (Dahlitz and Morrison-Saunders, in press), analysis of treatment of greenhouse gas emissions in 12 EIAs (Ohsawa & Duinker (2014), and adaptation of sustainability assessment criteria for community governed projects subsequently applied to a single case study (Vincent and Morrison-Saunders 2013). Further examples of publications from masters' dissertations in other international journals include work done on the cost of EIA (Retief and Chabalala 2009), the quality of impact statements (Sandham et al 2013) and the quality of strategic assessment tools (Marais et al 2014). These types of papers do have valuable insights or ideas to offer the international community but being smaller context specific studies, they need to find ways to communicate an international message if they are going to be worthy of publication and have an impact on international research and practice.

The multi-disciplinary nature of impact assessment seems to encourage some authors to draw in ideas and learnings from other fields; examples include the fields of psychology (Retief 2013), planning (Richardson 2005), decision making sciences (Kornov and Thissen 2000), and human rights (Kemp and Vanclay 2013). We are also aware of Issues based papers which are centered around ongoing debates or resolution of issues within the impact assessment community such as resilience (Slootweg and Jones 2011), integration (Retief et al 2014), significance (Erlich and Ross 2014) and learning (Jha-Thakur et al 2009). This paints a very diverse picture which seems to lack coherence or any sense of systematic evolution of debates and ideas, with many issues having a relatively short shelf life. It is therefore difficult to systematically trace learning and or progression in thinking. There are bound to be cases of 'redesigning the wheel' and instances where old ideas are presented as novel. Overall, the nature of impact assessment research is that it happens within the slipstream of a very fast developing, volatile and vibrant field of practice.

Reflections on impact assessment research writing

Taking on the IAPA editor role came with an expectation to host the 'Meet the Editors' session at the

annual IAIA conference. Here the IAPA editors and the editors of JEAPM and EIA Review (when available) would explain the peer review and publication process to prospective authors and other interested parties. Such discussions naturally invited reflection on the qualities of paper writing that increase chances of acceptance for publication and ways to enhance communication of important impact assessment research findings. This led to us further developing workshops specifically around how to write journal papers (Morrison-Saunders et al 2012) and on teaching writing skills and research methods to students (Morrison-Saunders 2014). As the old adage goes, "if you want to learn something, teach it" and we believe that our engagement with research students in this way has enhanced our own writing and research skills. The use of intensive writing workshops has also enabled us to be more productive in terms of our own published output as well as enhancing the success of our students publishing their first papers arising from masters or PhD level research.

Teaching of writing skills simultaneously borrowed from and contributed to our role as editors. Problems we have identified in papers submitted to us as editors have led us to promote solutions or ways to avoid these for aspiring writers in our workshops. While we could discuss many aspects of writing here, we choose to focus on the following three key requirements that we believe lie at the heart of good scholarship and if delivered successfully will increase the chances of impact assessment research not only being accepted by reviewers and editors alike for publication, but increasing the chances of influencing other impact assessment researchers and practitioners:

- having a clear aim or research question, that becomes the central focus for each section (note: always employing identical phrasing that matches keywords in the title of a paper), ending with the conclusion in which the 'answer' to the research question is provided (Cahill et al 2008);
- providing a robust account of methods used to carry out a study (e.g. Arceci 2004) not just simply describing what was done, and backed up with appropriate rationale (i.e. with references) for the choice of methods; and
- writing for a particular audience (e.g. in impact assessment research that might be consultants, regulators, proponents or other impact assessment researchers) and having a clear message for them (Cahill et al 2008).

It seems to us that many authors carry out interesting research but become fixated on the results of their particular case studies within their own impact assessment jurisdiction at the expense of telling a good research story. They frequently meander away from their stated aim, forget to rigorously justify their research rationale, and overlook the international readership of journals. We suggest that giving careful attention to these three points in manuscripts submitted to journals will increase reviewer and editor acceptance for publication, as well as subsequent readership and citation strike rates, and hopefully by extension influence on future impact assessment practice.

Closing thoughts

Impact assessment research is alive and well as evidenced especially by the three international journals, IAPA, JEAPM and EIA Review devoted to the topic (a summary of the diversity of papers submitted to IAPA can be found in Morrison-Saunders and Retief, in press 2015). This diversity in impact assessment research shows high levels of innovation but also a general lack of geographical scale and scope (i.e. integrated research across jurisdictions) and temporal scale (i.e. research over extended time periods) which makes it difficult to gain a holistic understanding. As we argued in Retief (et al 2014) the diffusion of the field into multiple 'brands' of impact assessment and the invention of new acronyms is potentially dangerous as it appears more as empire building rather than helping advance the overall field. Further there is evidence to suggest that impact assessment may be under threat (e.g. Bond et al 2014) which further underlines the urgent need for sound empirical research to inform effective practice. On this front we have explicitly called for research effort aimed specifically at demonstrating the benefits of impact assessment (Morrison-Saunders et al, in press).

To finish we address the final question of Fischer and Noble (2015), namely: *What needs the most*

urgent attention in future research endeavors? We would like to see more large scale empirical research over extended time periods. This could happen through better international collaboration between established researchers across different jurisdictions and/or through national impact assessment system review processes. At the moment there seems to be a lack of both large scale international research collaboration as well as continual long term empirical macro level system reviews. To achieve this we need to create more synergy between researchers and establish research teams with critical mass, to produce empirical research outputs that represents larger scales and longer time periods. However in doing so it is important not to overlook the lessons of the past. As editors and reviewers of impact assessment research, we have been increasingly dismayed and disappointed by authors failing to address an appropriate breadth of old and new literature. Sometimes this is characterized by researchers only citing recent works (presumably so that their work gives the impression of being cutting edge or up to date). Ignoring the early work is problematic, especially since the fundamentals of impact assessment have not changed over four decades, and many insightful thinkers in the seventies, eighties and nineties provided profound research conclusions on many aspects of how impact assessment works. Citing only recent works can be misleading because it risks presenting old concepts or ideas as being new or novel. Of course innovation in research should always be actively encouraged but the key to good writing is to make sure that arguments are grounded in terms of existing knowledge and that claims of innovation and advances are justified and valid. We would therefore like to see the scholarship of impact assessment research proactively building knowledge of the field in a cooperative and respectful, and thus ultimately rigorous and convincing manner.

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