

## **Training future impact assessors: issues in undergraduate teaching of social impact assessment**

*Ms. Mary Mahoney & Dr. Mardie Townsend*  
*Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria, Australia. 3125*  
*(03) 9251 7268, (03) 9244 6017 (fax),*  
[marym@deakin.edu.au](mailto:marym@deakin.edu.au) or [mardie@deakin.edu.au](mailto:mardie@deakin.edu.au)

### **Abstract**

Whilst most undergraduate students are bombarded with theory, policy and practice within their chosen area, few (if any) of them understand the importance of impact assessment and fewer still are provided with the skills necessary to undertake it. Yet, in many fields, the future decisions and actions of these soon-to-be professionals will be severely constrained by the failure of past policy makers and practitioners to assess adequately the impacts of their decisions and actions. The literature in many fields (for example, health, welfare, education, environment) is littered with evidence of the ways in which past decisions and actions were inadequately examined to assess their potential impacts. Consequently, the measures which may have mitigated or ameliorated the negative effects of such developments were not even identified, let alone put in place, resulting in the current 'less than optimal' situations. So, a critical question arises: how can the nexus be broken?

This paper draws on the experiences of the authors, both as practitioners of SIA and as tertiary educators teaching SIA, to highlight the value of undergraduate teaching of SIA techniques across a wide range of fields.

Problems confronting the introduction of SIA teaching at undergraduate level are explored, including the general community and academic community understanding of the value of SIA and therefore of the worth of its inclusion in undergraduate curricula. The paper concludes by elaborating some broad approaches to undergraduate SIA teaching, including the use of teaching conferences, video-conferencing, 'shadowing' and field experience, as well as the more traditional methods.

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[marym@deakin.edu.au](mailto:marym@deakin.edu.au) or [mardie@deakin.edu.au](mailto:mardie@deakin.edu.au)

As a means of promoting discussion within the IAIA conference concurrent session on 'Training and Capacity Building' and among conference participants as a whole, this paper poses some issues for discussion and response into the future.

*Prediction 1: Forecasting the Future: Impact Assessment for a New Century - unless education is given greater priority the forecast for impact assessment in the future is slow and lack lustre.*

It is not our intention to be critical of the vital place of training and capacity building in the future of impact assessment, simply to consider extending it. If we consider definitions of the three, training, capacity building and education, it becomes clear that they serve very different functions both now and into the future. Currently, training is defined as "the act or process of providing or receiving instruction in, or for, a particular skill, profession, occupation, and capacity building aims to build the ability to receive, contain, hold, produce or carry (in this case) knowledge skills and processes. (New Oxford English Dictionary, 1993) Education is clearly broader than both of these involving knowledge, skills, understanding, and abilities such as reflection, analysis, synthesis and refinement.

IAIA must promote the role of education for IA more broadly. Traditionally education of IA, SIA and EIA occurs at post graduate level. Students at PG level are seen to be able to work in an interdisciplinary manner far more effectively than at undergraduate level. The majority of people, however, who work in the areas affected by IA, such as policy development and strategic planning, do not have a postgraduate education and if they do, it will probably not be in an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary field. Education about IA is required not only for potential practitioners and the general population, but also for policy makers and strategic planners. Training is geared to increasing the skills of IA practitioners, however, until such time as policy making takes account of the impact of policies on the broader social environment, then policies will continue to be developed which have detrimental impacts. The nexus needs to be broken between poor policy development and the need for people to repair that damage, so that in future the initial formulation of policy incorporates IA and thus diminishes the need for IA, which is based on reparation. This will be achieved by mainstreaming IA into the policy development process, which necessitates the teaching of it across all disciplines from undergraduate to postgraduate levels. Yet this does not appear to be a priority for IAIA, in the literature or in university curricula. This is especially true for social and health impact assessment.

*Prediction 2: Given the acceptance of the importance of prediction 1 - existing structures in higher education militate against the achievement of an integrated education in IA.*

The problems confronting the teaching of SIA in higher education arise out of an inability of the existing higher education system to keep pace with the changes and challenges facing society into the new millennium. The fact that there are obstacles to the achievement of goals within disciplines such as IA, does not mean that organisations such as IAIA should not ask challenging questions. There is a sense that the achievement of long-term goals of one partner in this equation are bound up with the ability of the other. It is essential to the future of IAIA that changes occur within education in just the same way that education requires the development of innovative new ways of looking at problems and their resolution. Education will not change without an imperative. That imperative will come from conferences such as this.

This paper is not about the 'hows' of teaching IA/SIA, it seeks to raise more fundamental questions about the features within an existing education system, which currently act as a barrier to change. By and large, current day educational practice in higher education is embedded within the structure of discrete disciplines. The opportunities to work in a transdisciplinary way, using innovations or new ways of working with knowledge are very rare. Lowe, in his book, *Our Universities are Turning us into the Ignorant Country*, states that “the university system has so many problems that it is no exaggeration to describe the situation as a crisis” (1994, 4). He argues that the arrival of the new millennium will demand a new approach to higher education. Similarly, Eva Cox (1995) in the Boyer Lectures (Australia’s equivalent to the Massey Lectures in Canada) also states,

I am back at a university after a twenty year break and I like not what I see.... Universities are no longer funded as repositories of knowledge and debate. Even though they are still teaching and research institutes, they are now almost entirely defined by quantitative outputs and their relevance to employment and industry.... Government funding policies are turning academic disciplines into production lines where the joy of learning is lost. It is ironic that students are losing the freedom to explore and debate ideas at the undergraduate level just at a time when we let more people with disadvantaged backgrounds into the tertiary education sector. (Cox, 1995, 77)

Lowe identifies 3 specific preoccupations within the current system, which militate against creativity and innovation that are of vital importance in the context of IA. These are:

**Perceptions of irrelevance:** which includes an inability or unwillingness to move away from traditional modes of delivery that have historically been based on didactic teaching, “posited in the notion that there is a fixed body of knowledge to be transferred to students” (1994, 18-19). This includes a failure to modernise the content of courses, and use of pedagogical approaches, which are not suited to preparing students for a complex world of rapid change.

**Specialisation:** this results in students who have ‘tunnel vision’ and are incapable of seeing the wider implications of applying their knowledge; who are unaware and unprepared for the real world and for problem solving which requires understanding of the links and interdependencies. Lowe advocates the need for a team approach, which is reflective of problem solving and generating solutions in the real world. The example he provides is analogous to the importance of teaching SIA. He cites an example of an economics student who knew nothing about politics, studying on a course that did not require her to.

Allowing students to graduate in economics without understanding its political implications, or in the technologies without appreciating their wide ranging social implications is like instructing army artillery officers in the mathematical principles of ballistics without telling them that the shells explode and kill people. It is almost culpably irresponsible. (1994, 20)

**Abstraction:** this involves the preoccupation with acquiring academically pure and highly credible theories and models; or detachment and academic objectivity which has virtually no link to the real world or the social connections associated with it.

The factors that militate against education’s ability to promote the values of SIA fall into 4 broad areas. These are interlinked and interdependent and so creating change would be extremely complex and multifaceted.

The overarching educational environment. The current structures and funding of educational bodies limit their capacity to accommodate change. By way of illustration, Cox provides the following example:

As academics depend more and more on research funds from industry, independent advice from academics becomes hard to find. For instance it would be exceedingly hard to find a university that can deliver independent advice on food and nutrition without jeopardising existing and future research funding. This ‘partnership’ between industry and academia affects the potential operations of the food regulators and the safety of our food supplies. There is no corruption or deliberate fraud but what are the consequences of joining the tertiary sector to industry? (1995, 76)

For instance, in the case of SIA where the lecturer is employed as a consultant, they must reflect the views of the community and deliver a balanced and fair assessment of the proposal. If these views are at odds with the stance of the university, its partners or funding bodies, such a conflict is inevitable.

As well, reliance on the teaching of discrete disciplines as the basis for education, makes it increasingly difficult, in an already stretched work environment where staff are required to undertake research, teaching, consultancy, administration, university and community service, publishing, etc. to work as a team within the teaching context. Multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary connections such as those required within SIA, are therefore harder to achieve and holistic considerations within teaching programmes fade.

The facilitators of the learning process. This relates to the knowledge, skills and interests of the lecturer and includes: the individual's teaching versus research interests; their skill in teaching and course planning; opportunities provided for them to keep up to date with new or different approaches (e.g. cooperative learning, active learning, experiential learning, transformative education, etc); their ability to, or interest in, working as part of a team; their understanding of the learning process and students needs; their awareness of external resources available to add reality to their teaching; their own experience; etc. In SIA, lecturers needed to bring a range of perspectives to the situation and be willing and able to share these.

The expectations of the students. With the increasing availability of distance, off campus, off shore education programmes and study materials, there is an increasing expectation amongst students that if they read the book and do the exercises they fully comprehend the subject. Universities are to be applauded for making education more accessible and egalitarian. However, initiatives which do not encourage or allow for debate, conversation, discussion, interpretation, and interaction at formal and informal levels are doing a great deal of damage and creating inappropriate long term expectations in the learners.

The nature of change. As humans, our 'comfort zone' with change varies. This is true at every level from learner, facilitator and institution. The struggles of, for example, environmental education over the past decades to achieve recognition and a genuine place on the curriculum are evidence of this. Hicks (1995) states a similar case in terms of gaining acceptance for futures education in the curriculum, citing the fact that students want to see greater attention paid to it in the curriculum and institutions failing to respond. Holistic studies, by their very nature, involve uncertainty for both the learner and the facilitator. There is no safe haven of a formula to return to and this is challenging for all concerned. For institutions, newness may equate to unfamiliar 'soft options' which may reflect on the way they are perceived within the broader environment, lack of precision about appropriate student numbers or long term viability of the innovation.

*Prediction 3: As global issues become more obvious the challenge to provide an education that focuses on predicting the consequences of proposed actions will increase rapidly - impact assessors should be ready to provide those solutions through innovative education.*

If we as professionals and practitioners of IA (and in particular, in this case, SIA) believe that what we are doing and advocating for is vital for the long term viability of the planet, then we must strive for educational change which fosters creativity and innovation. We must actively encourage opportunities for people from different backgrounds to work together, to debate, reflect on and interpret, to exchange ideas and create new solutions, and in a sense, be encouraged to be taken out of themselves and their normal environment to be able to focus on, and cope with, uncertainty and a range of potential perspectives. "Innovation" in higher education is therefore defined as the opening up of such opportunities and transferring them to the learning experiences of students in an holistic way.

If we were to brainstorm for the specific elements that would make SIA teaching effective and innovative in an ideal world, the list would probably resemble the following:

- the involvement of an interdisciplinary teaching team,
- the introduction of social and environmental dimensions into the learning experience,
- the opportunity to offer different teaching and learning strategies which cut across traditional boundaries,
- the ability to call on a range of external resources to enhance the learning experience, including people who have been impacted upon by proposed actions and proponents of developments,
- the real opportunity to involve the learner in directing their learning experience,
- the opportunity for working with a diverse cohort of students (mature age, school leavers, international students) who are all encouraged to input their experiences and interests,
- the chance for students to make connections and explore problems, issues and solutions with SIA professionals, planners etc, facing these dilemmas in their daily work environment,
- the chance to see students as professionals and give them the opportunity to develop the capacity to participate in processes as a professional,
- the chance to make the links and connections within a university program consisting of separate units of study, thus allowing students to see that the knowledge and skills they bring to a SIA are complementary to and different from the perspectives another student will bring.

Approaches that are suitable to achieve this innovative SIA education include teaching conferences, video-conferencing, 'shadowing', field experience, as well as the more traditional methods. For instance, students could shadow an actual SIA completing one in parallel and comparing the real process with their perspectives.

Conferences, for instance, are a vital, internationally respected and common-place method of disseminating information and providing a forum for professional debates for virtually all disciplines. Their value is rarely, if ever, questioned by professionals and their use is becoming more widespread. The application of the conference to the formal education setting, however, appears rarely to have been explored. As we all know, conferences offer benefits at many levels for delegates including providing the opportunity to: *listen to* key speakers; *focus on* specific issues; *participate in* workshops and debates; *learn about* current research through poster presentations; and *interact* professionally and socially creating future networks, through visits and functions such as the conference dinner. Additionally they provide an opportunity for individuals to *become part of* the "collegiate" of professionals through *participation* both in the debates and in forming the agenda for future action. This would be an ideal forum for teaching IA in the broadest sense allowing for a range of diverse perspectives to be introduced and explored.

In summary, to achieve the long-term goals of the IAIA, education which is innovative, creative and novel will be needed. The solutions to the issues facing societies will also need to be innovative, creative and novel and IAIA has a critical role within those challenges.

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