

Impact Assessment Outlook Journal

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Competency and Certification in Impact Assessment

Thought pieces from UK and International practice



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Welcome to Volume 22 of the Outlook Journal, which brings together articles focusing on the need for, and what entails, competency within Impact Assessment (IA). Through the articles in this Volume, myself and the authors provide perspectives across early career in IA, a range of EIA related competencies from co-ordinator, via landscape and visual IA through to the marine sector—all from a UK context. We then explore changing needs due to advances in digital tools, before taking in some international views from IA capabilities in international finance and take a dive into how EIA professionals are increasing recognition in Australia.

I have always been interested in effective IA practice and the role that individual skills and team capabilities coalesce to deliver a great result for the environment and society alongside enabling more sustainable development. I spent nearly a decade at IEMA helping to support those in the IA field with their continuing professional development (CPD) and even had an 18-month stint as the Institute's Head of Professional Standards, which was very rewarding. My passion for enhancing competency and capability around IA ultimately drove me to start my own micro-consultancy focused on just that—Fothergill Training & Consulting Ltd—back in the summer of 2016. Since then, I have worked on IA related capacity building for the World Bank, across the world from Nepal to Gibraltar and Hong Kong to Nigeria, but my focus has been the UK and Ireland, where I have trained over 1000 professionals in IA in recent years.

Given the above, I jumped at the chance to guest edit this volume of the IA Outlook Journal during my first meeting back as an elected member on the steering group of IEMA's award winning IA Volunteers Network. It is fair to say that Volume 22 has far more articles focused on competency than certification. This was a choice, as I felt you, as the reader, would like to explore

a little further 'under the surface' of what it means to be a capable and effective IA professional and how to get there. We do have three articles that specifically draw on recognition schemes: the first is linked to IEMA's May 2024 advice note on what makes a competent expert in health IA, and the others are a pair of articles exploring registration systems for EIA professionals in Australia and the new requirements for formal sign-off of ES in New South Wales.

So what can you expect from Volume 22's contributing authors? Well, the first thing to say is we have a bumper edition with 11 great articles for your reading pleasure. We start off with articles from earlier career IA professionals exploring how competency and having the structures supporting how to achieve it can help your journey as an IA professional. Millie Hartridge from Mott MacDonald provides advice for those new to IA in relation to EIA competency and certification, after which we have a co-authored article from Lisa Nelson and Omar Hallab from RPS, who reflect on how IEMA's new advice on health competent experts can help growth and career planning.

The next articles draw on IEMA's core UK membership and link to the EIA process. The first sees Mark Cope,

RSK Environment's Associate Director of EIA, dive straight in on the critical question: what makes a competent EIA coordinator? The piece provides a call to arms to IEMA's EIA members to band together and develop a clear position statement on this professional role. Mike Spence of MS Envision provides a similar perspective but through the lens of the capabilities needed by those in the landscape architecture profession who lead Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) within EIA and more widely.

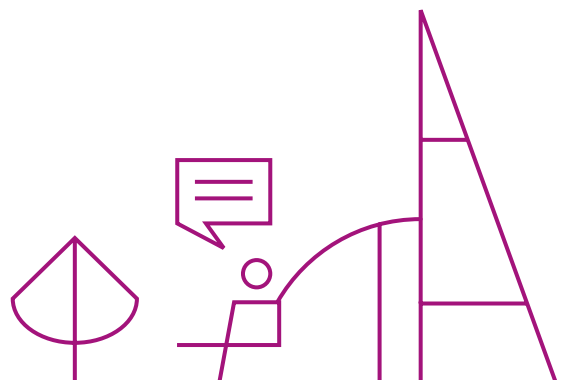
In the next two UK oriented articles we pivot away from role and, instead, look at progress in a specific sector and in one of the UK's devolved nations. Up first is an article about the competencies needed across the professionals contributing to IA work in marine consenting, co-authored by Julia Thompson of Ramboll and Fiona Brown at ABP. The next article is from me—Josh Fothergill—where I discuss my experiences across four years of helping Northern Ireland's government enhance EIA capacity across its planning system.

We then turn to how the increasing pace and penetration of digital technologies, including the more recent advances in Artificial Intelligence (AI) in IA is driving a shift in capability needs for our profession. Ruth Henderson at Royal HaskoningDHV provides her in-depth perspectives on how the EIA coordinator role has had to get 'tech-savvy'. Ellen Selley from Buro Happold then presents a complementary piece on how EIA roles, from graduate to senior, need to upskill to enable the digital approaches that are now at the forefront of practice.

The latter part of Volume 22 expands further to draw together perspectives from international IA practice. The first is from Mark King of King Sustainability who takes from his previous leadership roles including Chief Officer for Environmental & Social Standards at the World Bank and Director of Policy and Project Oversight at EBRD to consider the challenges of seeking quality E&S professionals in the work of financial institutions.

Our final pair of articles draw on IEMA's new membership alliance with the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ¹). In the first, Lachlan Wilkinson from JBS&G Australia dives into the history and approach to the accreditation of IA practitioners across Australia and New Zealand. The second article from Erica van den Honert of the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure and Fiona Gainsford of Gainsford Environmental Consulting, explains how EIANZ's accreditation system allowed the State of NSW to implement mandatory certification of EIA into its regulatory requirements and how this is working in practice.

1 www.eianz.org



Guidance for graduates and those new to Impact Assessment with regard to competency and certification

The competent expert in Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is referred to as follows:

(5) In order to ensure the completeness and quality of the environmental statement—

(a) the developer must ensure that the environmental statement is prepared by competent experts; and

(b) the environmental statement must be accompanied by a statement from the developer outlining the relevant expertise or qualifications of such experts.²

The definition of competency is, purposefully, loosely prescribed. Most EIA practitioners are ‘generalists’, possessing wide-ranging knowledge across a number of environmental disciplines and, therefore, a variety of skills contribute to an individual’s competence. This article focuses on EIA, although it is acknowledged that competency for technical subject specialists, such as ecology or noise, is distinct and follows different pathways.

Competency and certification are confusing concepts for a graduate or someone new to impact assessment, particularly the use of the word ‘expert’. This article aims to provide encouragement and practical advice to gaining competency from the start of a career in EIA.

Competency in most professionals’ careers begins with obtaining a relevant degree, alongside graduate membership of a professional body such as IEMA. It is

understood that these are the predominant elements that demonstrate competency and certification. Additionally, being part of an organisation which is accredited by IEMA’s EIA Quality Mark, like Mott MacDonald, adds to wider competency.

The definition of competency in the EIA Regulations is non-prescriptive and therefore competency is broad and should be appropriate to the task being undertaken. For example, the competency level of an Environmental Statement (ES) chapter author will be different to the overall ES approver. Knowing when to challenge decisions is important and, equally, when to ask for help in line with IEMA’s Code of Conduct on competency.

The requirement for competency is not intended to exclude professionals from working within impact assessment

It is harder to demonstrate competency and certification early in your career, particularly in today’s remote world, with fewer opportunities for spontaneous conversations at work. However, this should not be a barrier and the requirement for competency is not intended to exclude professionals from working within impact assessment. Consequently, the following sections aim to provide

² The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017

a framework for graduates and those new to impact assessment to develop competence.

Continued Professional Development (CPD)

CPD is often overlooked, but it is one of the best tools you have as a new professional in EIA. CPD is any activity in which you are learning something new or developing or putting skills into practice, and it can include internal or external webinars, giving presentations or receiving training. It will keep you aware of future trends and developments in the industry—on emerging topics, you might even find you are more up to date than some of your senior colleagues!

Transferable skills

It has been long known that transferable skills are central to effective EIA practitioners. As the EIA process involves working with a number of other professionals and stakeholders, good written and communication skills are key. This blend of skills is needed to facilitate discussions, relay information and work together to devise optimal solutions to challenges. Writing and communication are certainly skills you will have developed through university study or previous work experience roles.

Working with different teams

The learning that can be gained through working with a variety of other teams should not be overlooked. This includes understanding the priorities of other teams' tasks and how these fit in with the wider EIA context. For example, with ecology surveys, learning how many species surveys are required, during which months of the year, and factors which can prevent surveys from being successful, as per best practice, is useful. This knowledge ensures an EIA practitioner is prepared to discuss issues or challenges and helps to embed mitigation early in the project. This also provides an understanding of where EIA sits in relation to other environmental specialisms, the planning process and wider environmental legislation. Therefore, by working

with a pool of competent experts outside of your immediate specialism, lessons can be learnt from different career paths and experience.

Framework for experience

One way in which graduates and those new to impact assessment can evaluate skills gaps is to create a framework for experience. The IEMA skills map for your membership level³ is useful to understand which areas you are competent in, and which areas need developing further. Once identified, these skills can be made into tangible goals to break down any perceived barriers to developing competency.

Identifying lessons learnt

Another way in which competency can be built is to identify lessons learnt upon project completion or milestone reached. Reflecting on your role and actions, and identifying what you would have done differently, will ensure that you learn from experience with a critical eye. Additionally, it is useful to reflect on the knowledge you now know, which can help on future projects in similar situations. Reflective learning will most certainly include learning on the job—being thrown in at the deep end into something new, although daunting and challenging at first, is where you may find you perform at your best. Equally, willing to be wrong and learn from corrective action are likely the situations you will remember the most.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to gaining or demonstrating competency and certification. What is considered 'competence' for each EIA practitioner is unique and is made up of the combination of experience and skills held. The key is to learn as much as possible from each project and take time to reflect on these lessons. Finally, be assured that with experience and time will come competency. Graduates and those new to impact assessment are the practitioners who will be shaping the future of EIA and so working towards competency is an exciting process.

³ www.iema.net/sustainability-skills-map

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HIA practitioners' reflections on the IEMA 'Competent Expert for Health Impact Assessment including Health in Environmental Assessments' guide

In this article we explore the role of new competency guidance in shaping our early careers. I (Lisa) started my career in Zimbabwe undertaking health risk assessments within the mining sector before moving to the UK. I have an Environmental Science and Health degree and Masters of Public Health. My path into Health Impact Assessment (HIA) has been via environmental safety and health. I (Omar) have a degree in Social Sciences and Masters in Public Health from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. My path into HIA has been from health research. We both started at RPS around the same time as junior members of the HIA team. The advertisement for these roles was the first time we had encountered HIA.

When we first began our careers in HIA, we found ourselves in uncharted territory, unsure of what career planning meant in this field. While established guidelines existed for conducting HIAs, there was a gap in guidance that describes the routes for developing and benchmarking competency for practitioners. This was a challenge, especially for those early in their careers. This lack of clear direction made it difficult to plan the development of necessary skills and knowledge, relying instead heavily on our instincts, research, and the advice

of industry veterans. The early days felt like navigating a maze. There was always an element of second-guessing ourselves, wondering whether we were developing the right skills. Even after undertaking multiple HIAs, we still grappled with imposter syndrome. We understood the basics of HIA but hesitated to identify ourselves as confident practitioners. Questions lingered about when to trust our professional judgement and when to push back against reviewers.

One of the key benefits of the framework has been the certainty it provides in setting professional goals

In May 2024, IEMA published their first competency guidance for HIA practitioners, Competent Expert for Health Impact Assessment Including Health in Environmental Assessment⁴, hereafter, 'the guide'. The guide answered many questions we had about our professional development in HIA and provided

⁴ Download the guide here: s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/iema.net/documents/IEMA-Competent-Expert-for-Health-RD-v3.pdf

Competent Expert for Health Impact Assessment including Health in Environmental Assessments



IEMA Transforming the world to sustainability

a framework for intentional and structured career advancement. The guide outlines the necessary steps to progress from supporting HIAs to being competent experts leading HIAs. This clarity has given us a pathway for Continuous Professional Development (CPD), facilitating ongoing learning to progress and stay current in the field. To date, we have undertaken training in various aspects of HIA, including scoping, defining baselines, reviewing legislation and policy, qualitatively and quantitatively analysing health outcomes and developing mitigation and enhancement measures. These skills have been reinforced through the guided delivery of multiple HIAs, with plans to expand our expertise in more complex assessment areas.

One of the key benefits of the framework has been the certainty it provides in setting professional goals. We have been able to critically assess our current skill sets, systematically review our achievements and expertise against the framework, benchmark our performance, plan new learning and measure ongoing progress. This

structured approach to CPD objective-setting ensures our career progression is aligned with industry standards, boosting our confidence in our work and professional judgments—a welcome remedy to the imposter syndrome we previously experienced.

The guide has also helped us identify specific areas for improvement. While we had a solid understanding of concepts and theories (e.g., the application of wider determinants of health, vulnerable groups, inequalities and equity and public health principles), we identified our knowledge of the diversity of other jurisdiction's public health challenges and sector-specific hazards and opportunities was limited. Advancing our knowledge in these areas has become our next milestone.

Looking ahead in our careers, the guide provides a basis to defend our work and professional judgment as competent experts in HIA. While for now our work will continue to be supervised by advanced experts, we can already use the guide to demonstrate our expertise, justify our positions, and validate our assessment conclusions during internal reviews. This testing and strengthening of our skills and judgements is important as the guide's increased clarity also brings a higher level of scrutiny to the HIA field. The guide empowers us to justify our positions, but simultaneously provides a framework for others to challenge our competence. The guide thus equips both those defending and those challenging HIAs. Despite this potential challenge, the guide ultimately is about promoting HIA quality, and this is to be welcomed. With quality comes the potential to deliver significant public health benefits through HIA.

In conclusion, the guide has supported us in finding more direction in our career paths as HIA practitioners, and with this clarity we have accelerated the development of our HIA practice. While it is too early to determine the full impact of the changes on our careers following the release of the guide, we can say that with this competency map we feel much more confident in navigating the inherently diverse HIA field. We hope that ultimately the guide will support many more people into HIA, making it a more visible and desirable career choice through which to enhance the wellbeing of communities and populations globally.



What makes a competent EIA coordinator?

Back in 2017, UK Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) regulations were updated to comply with European Council Directive 2014/52/EU. One of the more significant changes brought about in the updated legislation, as quoted in the first article of this Volume, was a requirement placed on new development projects to ensure that 'the EIA report is prepared by competent experts'. Furthermore, to ensure the completeness and quality of the Environmental Statement (ES) report, the developer is required to provide a statement outlining the 'relevant expertise or qualifications' of the experts who prepared the ES.

Anyone who has worked on project level environmental assessment in the UK will know that competency goes beyond simply setting out a statement of the expertise and qualifications of those that were involved in preparing the ES report. EIA is a complex, technical and iterative process, requiring input from a range of multidisciplinary specialists with a broad range of skills, attributes and knowledge.

Digging into this a little deeper, there are a number of unique qualities that those whose responsibility it is to coordinate the overall EIA and ES will be familiar with. Typical personal attributes of an EIA coordinator include being organised and communicable, having a sense of authority, agency and problem solving, and possessing task-orientated skills such as following scientific/academic methodologies, project management processes and report writing/formatting.

The EIA coordinator must be highly knowledgeable, with interests in the natural environment, social sciences and engineering/design, and have a good overview of the EIA Regulations, impact assessment practices and consenting requirements/planning case law. The EIA coordinator must also be well supported by peers

in their organisation and external professional groups, and have access to practice guidance, robust QA/review processes, report templates and technological innovations.

The depth of these qualities takes many years to develop. And yet there is a growing expectation on EIA coordinators, whatever stage of their career they are at, to be quick learners and instant experts. There is a perception of resourcing issues in the industry and of the availability of skills and expertise, to both prepare and evaluate environmental assessments.

Despite the pressures, and perhaps as a result of the issues, there does not seem to be a widely adopted competency benchmark for professional EIA coordinators in the UK.

IEMA offers Registered EIA Practitioner and Principal EIA Practitioner accreditation for individuals involved in the coordination of EIA. This requires the applicant to demonstrate experience in authoring key EIA deliverables. Similarly, IEMA also administers the EIA Quality Mark scheme for organisations that lead the coordination of statutory EIAs in the UK. EIA Quality Mark is a voluntary scheme, but it requires organisations to commit to excellence in their EIA activities and have this commitment independently reviewed in seven areas, including management and team competencies among others. Both EIA Practitioner and EIA Quality Mark have existed for over a decade, but neither are recognised industry-wide as a benchmark for EIA coordination competent expertise.

Some professional bodies including IEMA, CIEEM, IAQM and the Landscape Institute have sought to define, in technical guidance, specialism specific expectations of an EIA competent expert. Common themes running

through these expectations include a relevant degree, full membership/chartership of a relevant professional institution, practical specialist work experience, and knowledge of both the technical subject matter and EIA practice. These expectations go some way to demonstrating relevant expertise, but don't really provide a measure against which competency can be benchmarked.

To address the requirements of the EIA Regulations, a common approach adopted by EIA coordinators is to set out in the ES report their own names and qualifications as the EIA lead author(s), and the names and qualifications of each of the various EIA topic lead authors. Whilst this addresses the requirement of the EIA Regulations to provide a statement setting out the 'relevant expertise or qualifications', it does not directly address the requirement to ensure that 'the EIA report is prepared by competent experts'. No definition of the relevant expertise or qualifications of a competent expert is provided in the current EIA Regulations, and no planning case law has yet sought to clarify this.

The typical qualities of an EIA coordinator discussed above are also necessary to prepare a complete and quality ES, but the relative value placed on these qualities will vary from project to project, and from sector to sector. As with many things in EIA, this becomes a matter of professional judgement, in this case for the developer to decide when appointing their team of EIA professionals. Perhaps a question a developer could ask when appointing an EIA team is whether any person in the team has successfully given evidence at a judicial review to defend the overall quality and completeness of the ES? However, I doubt there are many EIA coordinators that have this experience, myself included.

Anyone who has worked on project level environmental assessment in the UK will know that competency goes beyond simply setting out a statement of the expertise and qualifications of those that were involved in preparing the ES report

Whilst the compliance position is a useful reference point, it is by no means a satisfactory position. As an industry we should aspire to good practice in EIA, not just legal compliance. IEMAs Registered EIA Practitioner and EIA Quality Mark do aspire to promoting good EIA practices, but these accreditations are over a decade old, and not generally recognised across the industry as a benchmark of EIA coordinator competent expertise.

Seven years have passed since EIA competent expertise became a legislative requirement in the UK. And now EIA regime change to Environmental Outcome Reports (EOR) is on the horizon, having been legislated in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023.

Is it therefore not long overdue that our industry settles on what makes a project level environmental assessment competent expert?



Landscape Architecture, LVIA and competency

Landscape is a design-focused profession with members achieving a level of academic qualification followed by a professional period to achieve Chartered Membership. The Landscape Institute is the charity which members join and develop professional experience to ensure competency standards are achieved.

In 2018 I was invited to be a Technical Competency Author in the fields of 'Digital technologies' and 'Photography and visualisation', both of which are competencies for being a landscape professional.

The Competency Framework⁵ was published in 2020, and splits the competencies into:

- Professional Competencies
- Core Landscape Competencies
- Additional Landscape Competencies

LVIA should be added as a core competency to the list of professional competencies

An individual's level of achievement against each competency would be assessed as follows:

A. Expert	The individual has expert knowledge of this competency and extensive experience applying it in practice. They are recognised as an authority in this area by others within and/or outside their organisation.
B. Accomplished	The individual consistently applies this competency in practice and can confidently make decisions and recommendations in this area.
C. Able	The individual has experience of applying this competency in practice.
D. Understanding	The individual understands the application of this competency in practice.

Within this framework there is no specific requirement for 'EIA', 'Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment' or 'Landscape & Visual Appraisal'. Instead, there are competencies for:

- Planning, legal, policy & regulatory compliance
- Quality of landscape
- Visualisation and photography
- Protected landscapes/places
- Landscape planning and/or policy
- Landscape assessment
- Heritage landscapes/places

⁵ www.landscapeinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/12476_LI_Entry_Standards_Competency_Framework-1_SEPT2023.pdf

Therefore, while LVIA (and LVA) is an important part of many practitioner's workload, it doesn't form a distinct 'competency' in the LI Competency Framework.

The university courses in the UK are all completely design-focused. There may be a module on landscape and visual impact assessment, but it doesn't form part of any core syllabus.

Based on the LI's technical competency framework it doesn't appear to need to.

GLVIA⁶ was published in 2013 and is the benchmark of LVIA in the UK. Despite numerous clarifications the document remains 'current' but fails to deliver a mandatory approach to LVIA. It is simply 'guidance'. There is also no minimum level LVIA, which means that the quality and consistency of LVIAs in the UK is extremely variable.

Having worked alongside many planning officers and been involved in multiple Public Inquiries, I have seen that there is ongoing concern over LVIA standards.

Examples include:

- ZTVs for tall sheds (25m tall) being calculated using ground level as a target point, and not the 25m shed.
- Small study areas chosen for tall development (2km study area for an 85m tall tower).
- Confusing plans with too much information on them.
- Elevations at different scales (existing buildings at one scale, proposed development at smaller scale, which makes the development appear smaller than reality).
- Photographs which fail to show the full site extents.
- Photograph images presented far too small.
- LVIA containing multiple viewpoints with no predicted view of the development.
- Visualisations prepared and presented with no technical basis or accuracy.

In Scotland, because of the historically poor standards of photography and visualisations in windfarm development, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and The Highland Council worked separately to develop technical knowledge on how to accurately and consistently present photography and visualisations. Between 2006 and 2017 this guidance was changing rapidly.

In 2012 The Mayor of London published the London Views Management Framework⁷ to introduce Accurate Visual Representation (AVR) requirements for tall development in London.

In the author's opinion, the minimum requirements are that the LVIA explains:

1. What the development will look like, the scale and massing
2. What the theoretical visibility of the development will be
3. Identify and agree a range of suitable viewpoints that will have a view of the development
4. From each viewpoint present the existing view which shows the site location and important features accurately
5. From all viewpoints present accurate visualisations that show the size and scale of the development from that location.

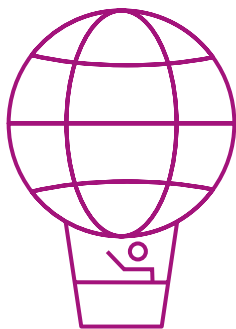
Too frequently the LVIA is used to simply support development, rather than providing an objective assessment. As a result, local planning officers find it difficult to clearly understand the impacts of a development.

⁶ Landscape Institute and IEMA (2013) *Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (3rd Ed.)*. Routledge.

⁷ www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/planning/implementing-london-plan/london-plan-guidance-and-spgs/london-view-management

So what is the answer to improving competency in LVIA?

1. There is an opportunity for focused Landscape Planning courses at universities, supported and endorsed by the Landscape Institute. These should be postgraduate degrees at either Diploma or Masters Degree level.
2. LVIA should be added as a core competency to the list of LI professional competencies.
3. There is an opportunity for professional training to be organised by the Landscape Institute.
4. There is the opportunity to publish GLVIA4 to replace the current guidance and the 'clarifications'.
5. There is the opportunity for the LI to provide guidance on how photography and Accurate Visual Representations (AVRs) can help planning officers and the public regain trust in what they are looking at.
6. There is the opportunity for the LI to provide guidance on preparing and presenting ZTVs to give a confident understanding of visibility of a development and to help with identification of viewpoints.



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Navigating success: core competencies and the power of collaboration in marine consenting professionals

The UK marine consenting process is a regulatory framework designed to manage and control activities in the marine environment to ensure sustainable development while protecting marine ecosystems. It varies by region, reflecting the devolved nature of environmental regulation. The main bodies responsible for marine consenting are Natural Resources Wales (NRW), Marine Directorate Licensing Operations Team (MD-LOT) in Scotland, the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) in England, and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in Northern Ireland.

Marine development in the UK plays a critical role in the nation's economy, contributing to a wide range of essential functions. For instance, it supports the extraction of minerals and aggregates vital for construction, while the development and maintenance of ports are key to facilitating international trade and transportation, and increasingly pivotal in supporting the UK's energy transition. Additionally, marine development includes the installation and maintenance of cable infrastructure to ensure robust connectivity, further enhancing economic stability and development. Whether large or small, unlocking development in the marine space and preventing delays in achieving consent requires a coordinated effort from various experts who bring specialised knowledge and skills to navigate the regulatory landscape. The key players in this process include regulatory officers and their technical advisors, environmental consultants, and client-side consent managers. Each of these roles plays a crucial part in ensuring that marine developments are feasible, compliant, and sustainable. Developing competent

consultants, regulatory officers and consent managers requires diligence on all sides when training and up-skilling staff who work on pre – and post-determination activities. This article will focus on the skills and competencies required for these roles.

Consultants acting as licensing agents must understand the overarching framework for licence determination to tailor a bespoke approach for each project. This involves defining the licensing strategy including survey requirements and specialist inputs. The role of a competent consultant therefore minimises programme and delivery risks through the implementation of the strategy, while translating this process to the client to ensure their understanding throughout.

A skilled consultant must be proficient in regulator and stakeholder engagement, and able to deliver robust and proportionate technical assessments with an understanding of the underlying legislation, e.g., Habitats Regulations, Environmental Impact Assessment, and Water Framework Directive. These consultants are able to identify and address the risks associated with site-specific constraints and understand the implications of certain decisions on the outcomes of a project licence. Skilled consultants are adept in aligning development projects with broader environmental goals ensuring promotion of long-term ecological balance.

A client-side consents manager must possess the competence to champion the environment and sustainable development while acting as the external point of contact for key consenting stakeholders. A consents manager must have strong project

To be truly confident therefore requires a collaborative team of specialists which builds trust and fosters mutual learning opportunities among regulatory officers, consultants, and client-side consent managers

management skills, a detailed knowledge of local, national and international regulations, and the ability to navigate complex approval processes. They should have experience with environmental planning and consents, coupled with the ability to analyse and interpret legal and technical documents, such capabilities help ensure efficient and compliant project execution to completion. Effective collaboration skills are required to ensure successful partnership between consent managers and consultants during development and delivery. In this context it hinges on robust communication abilities, which allow for clear and open dialogue and the ability to translate complex consenting matters into easily digestible decision pathways for internal stakeholders, ensuring that all parties are on the same page and working towards common objectives.

Meanwhile regulatory officers must deliver consistent advice and consent decisions through sound understanding of the applicable regulations, and their changing landscapes. A competent officer therefore has sufficient technical knowledge to produce proportionate licence decisions, while recognising the importance of obtaining technical input from suitable advisors, to give meaningful and consistent advice to each project. They must be capable of navigating legislation and case law, enabling them to provide comprehensive guidance to applicants. The delivery of consistent regulatory advice and licence decisions can significantly influence project cost and programme.

The expertise of regulatory officers in offering reliable guidance mitigates risks and supports informed decision-making, essential for the smooth progression and success of licensing projects. Managing applications and the various inputs from consultees requires suitable resource availability to allow case officers to project manage multiple applications. This resource allocation process, which currently feels stretched, is important to allow space for building trust between applicants and regulatory officers at the early stages of an application. As applications progress, this will include meaningful discussions with all relevant parties including stakeholders, and a need to show a united front. Maintaining trusted relationships with both applicants and external parties is another vital skill for regulatory officers, as it fosters collaboration, trust, and effective communication throughout the licensing process.

Ultimately, for all parties involved, displaying confidence in your subject area is essential when delivering marine licence development. Consultants must be confident in their technical strategy; regulators must be confident in their decision-making capabilities and consent managers must be confident in their role to deliver the scheme as consented. To be truly confident therefore requires a collaborative team of specialists which builds trust and fosters mutual learning opportunities among regulatory officers, consultants, and client-side consent managers. This combined commitment to continual learning and improvement not only enhances their expertise but also contributes to the overall advancement and credibility of the industry at a crucial time for the UK. This is crucial in marine consenting to enhance and streamline processes and improve efficiency, especially for applications where the interface between marine licensing and local planning jurisdictions overlaps. Trust and open communication facilitate transparent information sharing and timely, constructive and consistent feedback, while mutual learning promotes innovative solutions and comprehensive understanding of projects. Everyone involved must 'know their limits' with respect to technical understanding to deliver robust assessments and receive consistent advice as a result. This collaboration ensures early identification and mitigation of risks, aligns goals, and builds public confidence in the consenting process, ultimately leading to smoother project progression.

Setting the tone on EIA capability: how Northern Ireland improved EIA's application in planning through a capacity building focus

Northern Ireland's planning system is the youngest in the UK, with powers to award planning permission only returning to its 11 councils in 2015. Prior to this, a centralised approach to such consenting—via 'the Department'—had been in place for many years. A key challenge within this change was how to achieve the same depth and breadth of capabilities in the planning staff now sitting within each council, compared to the institutional capabilities of the previous unitary system. In relation to environmental assessment expertise—e.g., Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)—the challenge is further complicated as while the process is applied across the planning system, its requirements come from a source outside planning legislation.

Partly as a result of these challenges, by 2017/18 real concerns were being raised about the effective application of EIA law within the Northern Irish planning system. Concerns about EIA in Northern Ireland had also reached the ears of two significant institutions: the European Commission, which opened a pilot case—the forerunner to a European Court of Justice infraction case—and the Compliance Committee of the Aarhus Convention⁸, which opened its own investigation into a number of relevant issues.

In response to the above, and in recognising that system wide improvements required a consistent approach to environmental governance across the region's 12 planning authorities, the Department for Infrastructure

(DfI) chose to act. The DfI began the Environmental Governance Work Program (EGWP) with a focus on building and supporting EIA competence, confidence and capacity across the public sector side of the Northern Irish planning system. The EGWP did not take any responsibility from councils—which remained responsible for making local planning decisions and related EIA compliance—but offered the opportunity to engage in centrally funded and consistently structured quality support.

To design and deliver an effective suite of capability enhancement across the EGWP, the DfI tendered for expert EIA support, and contracted Fothergill Training & Consulting Ltd (FothergillITC) to act in this capacity. The EGWP's deliverables included the following core action areas:

- **Baseline and performance data** to understand the views of planning officers in terms of their initial level of knowledge, understanding and confidence in applying EIA, and to track how that developed both immediately after training delivery and at end of Phase 1 (after 2 years) and Phase 2 EGWP (after 4 years).
- **EIA Training courses** consisting of:
 - Core EIA training, to enhance fundamental compliance and process knowledge for planning officers, adapted for statutory consultee staff in Phase 2, and

⁸ The UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. Available at: unece.org/DAM/env/pp/documents/cep43e.pdf

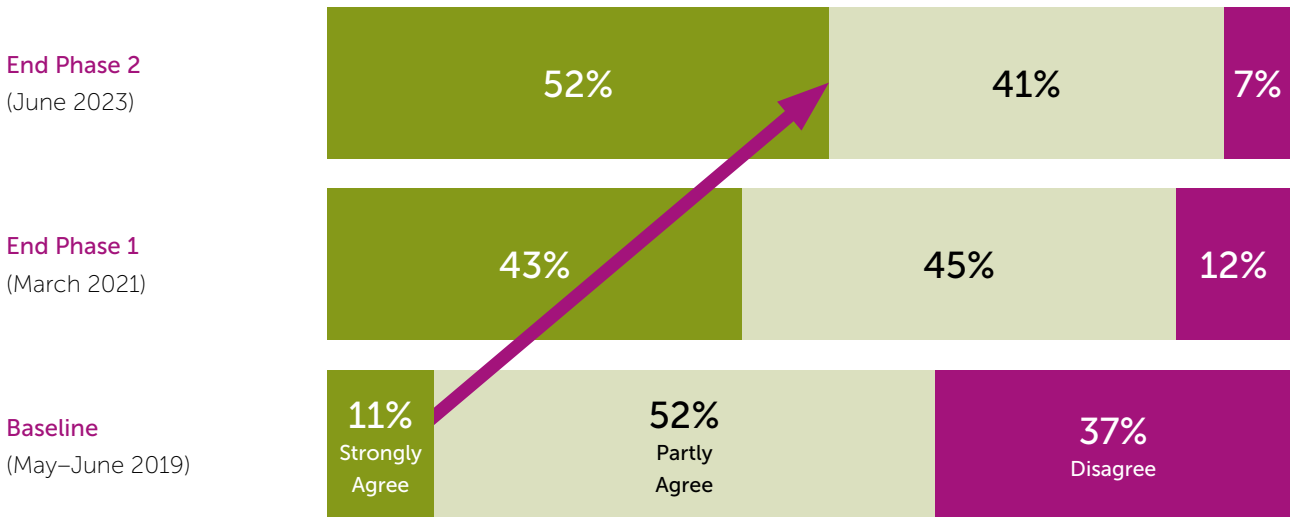
- Advanced EIA training, providing a greater depth exploration of EIA to selected planning officers who had completed Core. The courses were delivered in cohorts of up to two learners per council to help establish a community of practice across Northern Ireland’s Planning Authorities (PA).
- **Environmental Officers Forum:** A cross-council community of EIA practice attended by planning officers who completed the Advanced training. The Forum has an email group and came together for face-to-face / online meetings on a roughly quarterly basis; it was chaired by Josh Fothergill (EGWP EIA expert) across both EGWP phases and supported by DFI via engagement of staff with subject matter expertise.
- **New NI EIA Departmental Guidance:** Production of three new EIA-related Development Management Practice Notes (DMPN) across Unauthorised EIA (9A – Dec 2020), Screening (9B – Dec 2023) and Scoping (9C – Summer 2024), involving engagement on practice needs with planning officers and other stakeholders, drafting and iteration via legal review, and launch roll out.

In terms of achievements, the EGWP was a significant success with 151 planning officers and over 90 statutory consultee staff trained through the core EIA course, with 50 planning officers going on to also complete the Advanced EIA training

- **NI Engagement Workshops on specific EIA issues:** In Phase 2 (Summer 2021–2023) delivery of cross-cutting EIA events across the NI public sector to consider specific challenges, including intensive agriculture development, cumulative effects and case law discussions.

Agreement with the statement:

I feel confident in my ability to apply my understanding of EIA and environmental compliance to effectively deliver the tasks I am asked to deliver in relation to these requirements



The EGWP began in 2018 and was viewed by both central and local government as an important element in the ongoing planning improvement agenda. The most active periods thus far were Phase 1 (spring 2019–2021) and Phase 2 (summer 2021–2023), both supported by the external EIA expert. Phase 1 focused on planning authorities (DFI and councils), whilst Phase 2 sought to engage the wider public sector input into planning related EIA through training and engaging with statutory consultees.

In terms of achievements, the EGWP was a significant success with 151 planning officers and over 90 statutory consultee staff trained through the core EIA course, with 50 planning officers going on to also complete the Advanced EIA training. The outcomes of this in terms of longer-term confidence amongst planning officers can be seen in the example from the DfI performance review report considering the situation before EGWP and at the end of both Phases 1&2.

With the DfI funded external support coming to an end in summer 2023, the challenge now passes over to NI's councils to continue to both support on-going engagement, sharing of best practice and ensuring their EIA-related staff have opportunities to refresh knowledge and maintain confidence. Whether and how effectively this can be achieved alongside keeping up with other changes in planning, as well as resource and budgetary constraints, is unclear at this time; but the importance of ensuring effective compliance with environmental obligations in the planning system going forward should act as a deterrent against complacency.

There is much learning from the EGWP for other UK—and international—systems. This is especially the case as regular concerns are raised about a lack of public sector staff with the capability and confidence to help deliver proportionate and effective EIA to enable timely consent decisions. This was a root-cause problem identified by the Office for Environmental Protection's (OEP) October 2023 study into the effectiveness environmental

assessment in England⁹. It is an issue that has also been noted by the Onshore Wind Sector Deal in Scotland¹⁰, the June 2024 Offshore Wind Industry Council report¹¹, as well as professional bodies including IEMA and the RTPI.

The EGWP provides a model of how rapidly scalable EIA capacity and confidence enhancement can be delivered across the public sector, if there is the will, focus and a budget to do so. Without such structured intervention in relation to public sector EIA capabilities, it is hard to see how efficient action to enable a timely energy transition and resolution to the UK's housing crisis will be achieved alongside the maintenance of an effective environmental assessment process.

As regards next steps for Northern Ireland, the DfI took the bold step to deliver a system-wide intervention; however, the success of this in terms of improved consenting, community and environmental outcomes lies with maintenance of capability, confidence and an active community of practice. It is hoped that council planning authorities will 'pick up the mantle' and build on the momentum which was established through the EGWP. The importance of public sector (in all UK jurisdictions) capacity and competence in the area of environmental governance cannot be underestimated. It is an essential requirement in ensuring that our planning systems effectively deliver sustainable development within the context of housing, climate, nature, health and other challenges facing our society.

⁹ www.theoep.org.uk/sites/default/files/reports-files/E02979435_OEP%20Environmental%20Assessment%20Report_Accessible.pdf

¹⁰ www.gov.scot/publications/onshore-wind-sector-deal-scotland/

¹¹ www.owic.org.uk/news/cabinet-office-and-number-10-policy-unit-must-step-in-to-cut-offshore-wind-planning-delays

The digital revolution: traditional to tech-savvy EIA coordinators

An EIA coordinator is the individual responsible for delivering an effective, efficient, and proportionate assessment of a proposed development. They offer a unique perspective, bringing together skills including project management, budgeting, communication, negotiation, and people management. Considering the ever-evolving digital landscape, how will the skillset of an EIA coordinator need to develop to be a competent expert, or will the role become obsolete?

Definition of inputs and outputs

EIA coordinators play a crucial role in ensuring the consistency and coherence of documents such as Scoping Reports and Environmental Statements. They are responsible for aligning data, formatting, and writing styles to create a unified and well-presented report. With the increasing use of cloud-based software in document production, there is a shift towards automated processes that streamline the lifecycle of document creation. This technology allows for project parameters to be consistently propagated and reduces the risk of oversights, establishing a single source of truth. However, the effectiveness of this approach is contingent upon the quality of input data. This must be carefully defined at the outset by an individual, establishing standards, agreeing terms, identifying deviations from the norm, and considering other relevant details. The role of the EIA coordinator is essential in aligning the project description, client preferences, standards, local context, legislation, and accounting for all the various technical discipline differences to define parameters within the software. The EIA coordinator will also need to define appropriate Quality Assurance and Control Standards to ensure

the correct outcome—and these will be specific on a project need basis. By overseeing these aspects, the EIA coordinator ensures that the documents are coherent, accurate, and reflect project requirements. The definition of inputs by the EIA coordinator doesn't just relate to reporting but will also need to cover the whole lifecycle of digital assessment including Impact Assessment databases, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tooling, and automated site selection processes, to name a few. An EIA Coordinator will need to become an EIA data champion and be comfortable in this space.

The bridge between old and new

As IA practice embraces digital tools, it becomes crucial to determine the right technologies to identify appropriate assessment tools and facilitate project consultation. The EIA coordinators play a key role in communicating the EIA findings to stakeholders with differing access to technology and with diverse levels of accessibility, competency, and technical understanding.

While an entirely digital, online, and geographically spatially presented non-technical summary can enhance effective receptor-based reporting, it is essential to recognise the engagement needs of different stakeholders. Engagement for a rural community with limited internet connectivity will need to differ from a regulatory body or third party. Digital consultation can take many forms, such as virtual exhibitions, spatially represented data, impact assessment databases with defined outputs, iReporting, and more. The EIA coordinator must continually develop and adopt proportionate engagement tools and consider the diverse needs of stakeholders, while themselves staying informed about evolving practices

and standards. They will need to exercise judgment and sensitivity in selecting methodologies that align with the unique requirements of each group while providing opportunities to inform groups of new digital methods and facilitating more digital engagement. The selection of proportionate digital tools doesn't just relate to a consultation output but selecting appropriate digital techniques throughout the assessment process depending on the need of a project.

The human touch

As digital tools like Chat GPT and AI platforms become increasingly accessible, the influence of fake news and AI on IA practices cannot be underestimated. While AI advances aim to enhance the efficiency of IA practices through streamlined reporting structures, for example, the surge of misinformation and disinformation poses a credibility challenge for environmental assessments. EIA coordinators must prioritise critical thinking and information verification as part of the AI process. Opposing parties and community groups can now develop their own environmental assessments lacking context and credibility. A proficient EIA coordinator should use bespoke tools grounded in verifiable sources, offering tailored structures and predictive insights interpreted accurately. In this evolving landscape, developers and regulators will need to rely on competent human experts to verify information and maintain the integrity of EIA practices.

The definition of inputs by the EIA coordinator doesn't just relate to reporting but will also need to cover the whole lifecycle of digital assessment including Impact Assessment databases, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tooling, and automated site selection processes, to name a few

Summary

The traditional skillset of an EIA coordinator will remain at the core of IA practice as we continue driving forward into an increasing digital landscape. However, the EIA coordinator skillset will need to evolve to bring digital literacy, data management, definition of digital standards and adaptability to the forefront. The industry will need to consider how to provide definition around this space and how the current methods to define competent experts now, such as Environmental Chartership and the IEMA Register of EIA Practitioners, will need to also evolve to recognise these new skills. Professional judgement underpins the entire environmental assessment lifecycle and must remain at the heart of competency for EIA coordinators. Developers, regulators, stakeholders, and communities will need EIA coordinators to combine the application of digital tooling with expert judgement in a balanced and proportionate way. In summary, the role of the EIA coordinator is not obsolete in a digital world, but needed more than ever!

An exploration into digital Impact Assessment methods for competency

Introduction

Increasing competency is paramount in the professional development of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) practitioners. This includes consultants at the start of their careers, through to senior practitioners. Emerging digital technologies have the potential to enhance both the quality and accessibility of EIAs and to make the process more efficient. Upskilling in such methods should therefore be a key focus for every EIA practitioner.

Over time, traditional EIA approaches have evolved, with digital methodologies now at the heart of common EIA practice. With the rapid evolution of technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI), that we are currently seeing, there is likely to be a further step change in EIA practice over the coming years, making upskilling of the EIA workforce more important than ever.

The importance of upskilling in EIA

As recognised within the IEMA digital roadmap, 2024¹², 'EIAs can often be unwieldy and inaccessible. This limits the ability for many stakeholders to engage meaningfully with the project'. Emerging digital methods could provide new solutions to enhance the accessibility of EIA.

With the emergence of new tools and advances in technology, upskilling is essential for EIA practitioners to stay current. Continuous professional development ensures that practitioners can deliver high-quality assessments that meet regulatory requirements and stakeholder expectations. This competency is not only beneficial for individual career growth but also enhances the overall quality and effectiveness of EIAs.

Future directions

Looking ahead, the future of EIA will likely see further integration of technologies harnessing AI and automation capabilities. The emergence and uptake of such tools is an exciting opportunity for EIA practice, as it could speed up the Impact Assessment (IA) process, making it more accessible, repeatable and consistent. Digital EIA tools can also facilitate greater transparency and public participation during the consultation process, empowering communities to engage more effectively in decision-making.

We, as EIA practitioners, have a role to play in how the evolution of technology influences EIA practice. For example, software providers are offering the option to tailor tools to the needs of the consultant, allowing consultants themselves to play a part in the software development.

¹² IEMA (2024) *A roadmap to digital environmental assessment*. Available at: www.bit.ly/digitalEIA

A selection of in use and emerging digital tools are outlined in the below table.

Tool	What can it do?
<p>Report writing assistance</p>	<p>Automation can be used to tackle labour-intensive tasks, such as the gathering of baseline data for each respective EIA technical discipline, based on prompts provided. Consultants can feed in information such as the project red line boundary and development details (e.g., the number of residential dwellings).</p> <p>Generative AI is used to pull together text which is automatically captured into a report template format provided by the consultant. The text can be modified with prompts such as, 'make it longer' or 'be more concise'. Tools can also gather spatial data around a site, such as roads, cumulative schemes and potential receptors, categorising them by specified modelling parameters.</p> <p>Tools can make use of data which is extracted autonomously from public resources and can also be fed data by practitioners from private sources. The automation process can only lean on datasets which are of a suitable format. Therefore, if you provide data to the model (i.e., in a spreadsheet), the data must be formatted consistently to allow the tool to select the correct information. Data outputs must also be verified, and quality assurance procedures followed to ensure accuracy.</p>
<p>Digital twin technology</p>	<p>Digital twins are virtual replicas of physical environments, where an area is mapped in detail within a digital platform using a combination of AI, machine learning algorithms and sensors. The technology has been used within assessment, monitoring and stakeholder engagement processes to date, but with the evolution of the technology they could be applied to further aspects of the IA process. They can simulate project impacts on the environment, whilst providing an interactive tool to assess potential outcomes and mitigate risks¹³.</p> <p>It is crucial that models represent the final project design and, if overlaid, the latest environmental information. The tools can integrate real time data from sensors, historical data, and predictive modelling to analyse environmental conditions.</p>
<p>AI integration</p>	<p>Microsoft 365 is in the process of integrating AI into a suite of its applications, which could be used by EIA practitioners to enhance the accuracy, efficiency and presentation of information.</p> <p>This includes the integration of the AI tool Copilot into Word and Excel which can be used to generate content based on prompts, summarise data and provide text suggestions. As further AI integrations are brought into the software, the benefits could enhance Excel as an EIA database tool. Additionally, Teams offers plug in features for real time translation and transcription and AI in Powerpoint can suggest slide designs and layouts.</p>

¹³ Fothergill, J. and Murphy, J. (2021) *The State of Digital Impact Assessment Practice*, IAIA. Available at: training.iaia.org/the-state-of-digital-ia-practice

Challenges and opportunities

This advancement in digital tools will also present challenges. The rapid pace of technological advancement will require practitioners to continuously update their skills and knowledge. Additionally, there is a need for some level of standardisation of digital tools and practices to ensure consistency and interoperability across projects and organisations. It should also be noted that the initial increased cost associated with digital EIA technologies or perceived lack of value may affect uptake¹⁴. However, this barrier is likely to be broken, as new technologies become commonplace.

Upskilling opportunities could be provided in various formats e.g., webinars, training sessions, demonstrations from software developers and software trials. Knowledge sharing groups such as the IEMA Digital IA Working Group also promote the uptake and integration of emerging digital EIA methods within the profession, meeting regularly to discuss advances in the space and share upskilling opportunities.

The rapid pace of technological advancement will require practitioners to continuously update their skills and knowledge

In summary

In conclusion, the rapid evolution of technology has the potential to significantly enhance the quality and accessibility of EIA outputs, as stated in the Roadmap:

Shifting environmental assessments towards a digital environment offers an invaluable opportunity to transform these complex and lengthy documents into more user-centric, data-driven formats that are easier to digest and navigate.

Upskilling will be crucial for EIA practitioner competency to keep pace with technological advances. As digital technologies continue to evolve, they will undoubtedly play an increasingly important role in shaping the future of EIA practice. By embracing these technologies, practitioners can ensure that EIA remains an effective and improved tool for promoting sustainable development and protecting the environment.

¹⁴ Burrows, L and Byron-Grange, A (2023) 'Digital EIA: When does the future become the present?', IEMA. Available at: www.iema.net/articles/digital-eia-when-does-the-future-become-the-present

The challenges of seeking quality E&S professionals in Financial Institutions

In the world of international finance when we seek professionals ('service providers') to provide environmental and social services (impact assessment, due diligence, etc.) we aim to follow a systematic process which disciplines us into making fair and objective decisions over that selection. Despite this, subjective elements and 'grapevine' information can interfere with our objectivity: we may be swayed by factors that discredit or lower the value offering of a particular professional/firm in our eyes. The expression 'you are only as good as your last job' comes to mind. If, though, a provider is demonstrably good enough to carry out an assignment, shouldn't we give them a chance and not be swayed by information that is peripheral to our selection process? Top class sporting teams may perform badly and lose a few games but often go on to win titles.

Given that we have largely made choices in this partly flawed way across the world for decades, might a more formalised system of accreditation add value to our processes? Could such approaches yield fairer, more reliable and successful outcomes from the environmental and social (E&S) professionals we hire or contract?

Accreditation may be defined in different ways. In this piece I take a broad approach viewing it as the recognition of an individual professional's ability to carry out relevant E&S tasks to a defined standard using good industry/international practice on a consistent basis. This is a far wider definition than the creation of topic related/national systems of formal accreditation, such as IEMA's Registered EIA practitioner, which is one of those presented in the International Association for

Impact Assessment's (IAIA) *Compendium of National IA Professional Recognition Schemes: Individual EIA Practitioners*¹⁵. However, such formal accreditations systems remain rare even after 50+ years of global IA practice, so a broader view of less formal systems applied by key industry players, such as Financial Institutions (FI) is worthy of due consideration.

Accreditation is a function of expertise and experience *relevant to the task(s) in hand*. It follows that a service provider may be accredited for, say, biodiversity assessment but not for biodiversity offset creation. On the other hand, an 'all-rounder' may be what is required for a different task. Thus, one must define the scope that is to be covered by accreditation (e.g., environment and/or social/health and safety etc.). Accreditation processes may be broad in scope or more narrowly defined. Also, service providers may be accredited to differing tiers of competency and experience. The nature of accreditation processes has implications in terms of the ability to create them in the first place and sustain them over time, both in terms of financial and technical feasibility. There may be a clear benefit in having groups of service providers accredited within a narrow specialist field (for example, IEMA's recent publication on competent experts for health in IA, as discussed earlier in this Volume), but establishing and sustaining such a recognition system may prove far harder when compared to a system based on a broader suite of E&S competencies.

Expertise is not simply the possession of relevant academic degrees or vocational certification. It often goes well beyond that. Expertise may be gained by specialist training or years of 'on the job' practice guided

¹⁵ www.iaia.org/uploads/pdf/INNOVATION-GRANT-COMPENDIUM-FOTHERGILL.pdf

and supervised by others. Experience is the product of applying expertise successfully in a variety of contexts. Experience includes failing and learning from that to hone the skills, develop capability and help ensure those who are recognised as experts can adapt to the different contexts that exist on each project they work on.

An example of an approach to accreditation—in the form of expertise recognition and structured progression—is provided by my experiences at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). The EBRD has a contingent of 30-45 in-house E&S service providers. The approach involved ensuring high quality of service providers at entry by establishing stringent eligibility criteria in job advertisements and complemented by a rigorous shortlisting and interview process involving case studies and problem-solving simulations. A Job Family approach was used to define the expertise, experience and responsibilities required at increasing levels of seniority. Decision-making related to staff performance and promotion was carried out by several senior staff and based on performance feedback from clients and co-workers.

In far larger organisations where those with E&S related roles and responsibilities are widely dispersed across different nations and offices around the world (such as my experiences at the World Bank), a matrix-based approach is needed, which presents a range of challenges. My experiences in this context led to the aim of ensuring that a risk-based approach was taken to the allocation of staff to projects, such that staff with the highest levels of expertise and experience are allocated to address the most complex and challenging of project risks and impacts.

The challenges in such larger institutions are partly driven by scale with a large cohort (more than 550) of in-house safeguards staff, regularly supplemented by heavy reliance on short-term external contracts with individual consultants where quality at entry is not easily guaranteed. A further issue is ensuring quality of staff entering E&S roles, which may be low; especially where there is enforced horizontal movement of staff who possess little expertise, experience, or on occasions enthusiasm to 'serve their time' in an E&S role. Such

The nature of accreditation processes has implications in terms of the ability to create them in the first place and sustain them over time, both in terms of financial and technical feasibility

issues often arise from periodic rotation as part of formal career pathway models driven by organisation-wide human resources strategies. Inevitably, there are also resource constraints in terms of administering and funding an accreditation process and for coaching/supporting staff to reach requisite levels of expertise and experience. Finally, as the diversity of E&S issues and the levels of project risk increase (e.g., from general social issues to specific livelihood restoration, or benefits sharing) delineating and defining tiered levels of expertise and experience in a formalised accreditation becomes increasingly difficult. There is also the challenge of gaining—and retaining—organisational buy-in and the trust of senior E&S leaders in seeking to develop and implement such a system. All these challenges carry the risk of making such accreditation systems stall, or fail to gain wide adoption and uptake, meaning there can be limited real progress. With this can come an unwillingness for such institutions to discuss, debate and share their experiences, which may ultimately hold back improvements to E&S quality.

It would be fair to say that the quest for approaches to developing fit-for-purpose accreditation systems in the ESIA and ESG universe is far from over but equally many of the challenges seem unlikely to be addressed within a commercially driven environment or in scenarios where resource constraints prevail. At the end of the day, and in the absence of regulatory drivers, the currency that continues to speak the most to clients remains the quality of individual CVs and Bios; and these must be subjected to robust due diligence. *Caveat emptor!*

Accreditation of impact assessment practitioners in Australia and New Zealand

Since 2010, the Certified Environmental Practitioner Scheme (CEnvP¹⁶), operated by the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ¹⁷), has certified impact assessment specialists. This paper describes the background to the scheme and experience with certification, and briefly introduces the Registered Environmental Assessment Practitioner (REAP) scheme in New South Wales. The REAP scheme is the subject of an accompanying paper in this volume.

The need for a certification scheme

Several factors drove EIANZ to develop the CEnvP scheme over 20 years ago:

- The environment profession was maturing and becoming increasingly specialised.
- Communities at large were demanding greater environmental accountability from industry and government.
- Professional indemnity insurance was becoming more expensive and harder to obtain for environmental professionals.
- Some incompetent and unethical behaviour was undermining the credibility of the profession.

With the support of seed funding from the Australian Government, EIANZ commenced the CEnvP scheme in 2004 offering a generalist certification for practitioners with an environment-based degree. The intention was always for this to be complemented by certification in

specialist areas. Impact assessment was the inaugural technical area of specialisation with the first Impact Assessment Specialist certified in 2010.

The Impact Assessment Specialist certification

To qualify for CEnvP Impact Assessment specialisation, applicants must meet the CEnvP generalist requirements and demonstrate a range of additional proficiencies¹⁸.

These include:

- a thorough understanding of impact assessment methods
- high level analytical skills that draw on knowledge and experience and can be applied across disciplines
- robust interpersonal skills across a range of stakeholders.

Applicants must demonstrate they are competent to lead and integrate comprehensive multidisciplinary impact assessment studies.

The proficiencies are tested through a short essay, a review of four current example reports produced by the applicant, referee reports and an interview with a panel comprising three CEnvP Impact Assessment Specialists

¹⁶ www.cenvp.org/

¹⁷ www.eianz.org/

¹⁸ www.cenvp.org/impact-assessment-specialist/

In developing the required proficiencies, EIANZ drew on the Guideline Standards for IA Professionals¹⁹ prepared by the International Association for Impact Assessment. These provide criteria for an impact assessment 'practitioner' and 'administrator'. This separation was not adopted for the CEnvP scheme due to the large overlap between the proficiencies required for both roles and recognition that many impact assessment professionals move between the two roles during their career (sometimes several times).

The proficiencies are tested through a short essay, a review of four current example reports produced by the applicant, referee reports and an interview with a panel comprising three CEnvP Impact Assessment Specialists. The panel provides a report and recommendation to the CEnvP Board who make the final decision.

Once certified, CEnvPs must achieve a set minimum of continuous professional development activity over a two-year period and pay renewal fees. They must also commit to the EIANZ Code of Ethics and Professional Practice.

The CEnvP scheme has established Specialist Environmental Advisory Committees to provide for stakeholder consultation on the proficiencies and continuous improvement of each specialist certification. These committees provide advice to the CEnvP Board.

Demand for certification

While there has been strong interest in generalist certification across Australia and New Zealand (with 1260 people certified as of 30 June 2024), there had been limited interest in the Impact Assessment Specialist certification with only 30 professionals certified in the first 10 years of its operation. This changed in 2022 when the New South Wales State Government mandated a requirement for a REAP to sign off on environmental impact statements for projects designated as state significant. This generated a flood of new applications and there are (as of 30 June 2024), 50 people certified as a REAP through the CEnvP scheme (see accompanying article).

There clearly needs to be a driver for professionals to go beyond generalist CEnvP certification and seek specialist certification. While there is marketing and recognition value in such certification, this only motivates some practitioners. There is no question that governments mandating certification is the key driver. A similar increase in applications for certification was seen with the CEnvP Site Contamination Specialist certification when environment protection agencies across Australia made this a mandatory requirement.

Emerging disciplines

Other specialities are now being recognised as areas of technical expertise by regulators and the community. Notably, the CEnvP Scheme now has a Social Impact Assessment Specialist certification, believed to be a world-first. The first Social Impact Assessment Specialist was certified in mid-2023.

What's next

The CEnvP Impact Assessment Specialist certification is now well established. The rigour of the scheme is reflected in its recognition through the REAP scheme by the New South Wales Government. The required proficiencies have been refined over time, most recently, to provide greater recognition of the need to engage with First Nations peoples and respect their knowledge. The supporting information requirements were also amended to clarify that the example reports that must be provided by an applicant could include assessment reports produced by government regulators. This was to overcome a perception that the scheme was only focused on proponents and consultants.

While most environmental impact statements produced in Australia and New Zealand are of a reasonably good standard, feedback from governments across both countries is that they continue to be frustrated by the poorer quality submissions that then require considerable time in seeking and reviewing further information. For this reason, EIANZ continues to promote mandatory certification as a way to lift the overall standard of these documents. This is important if we want to ensure project approval decisions are made on a solid evidence base.

¹⁹ iaia.org/uploads/pdf/Guideline_Standard_IA%20Professionals.pdf

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Mandatory certification of EIA: now in action

The State of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, has recently legislated mandatory requirements for Environmental Impact Statements (EISs) to be signed off by suitably qualified persons. The scheme known as the Registered Environmental Practitioner (REAP) scheme (the scheme), is understood to be the first in the world where a government authority has mandated certification of Impact Assessment (IA) in legislation. This article discusses the background to the scheme, its introduction, and early experience with its implementation.

Background to and implementation of the REAP scheme

The scheme originated from the NSW Government's desire to ensure high quality EISs are prepared for major projects²⁰, to improve confidence in the outcomes of the assessments and to allow them to move more efficiently through the planning process. Certification, along with a range of guidelines and other measures, were seen as a way to achieve that aim. From 1 July 2022, every EIS submitted to the Department of Planning, Housing and Infrastructure (the Department), has been required to be accompanied by a declaration made by a REAP. This declaration includes statements relating to the compliance, completeness, accuracy, and legibility of the EIS.

Rather than develop its own certification scheme, the NSW Government recognised the value of accrediting

existing, well-respected schemes provided by professional associations in Australia. The development of the REAP scheme included extensive consultation with professional associations, regulators and industry.

Accredited schemes must meet criteria outlined in the Registered Environmental Assessment Practitioner Guidelines²¹. They are required to be run by professional organisations following a rigorous assessment based on the criteria and the recommendations of a Department evaluation panel. The Department is also responsible for management and oversight of the overall REAP scheme framework, including the accreditation, review, and oversight of the two current professional schemes for environmental assessment practitioners.

There are two schemes currently accredited in NSW, the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand's (EIANZ) independent Certified Environmental Practitioner (CEnvP) scheme, and a scheme operated by the Planning Institute of Australia (PIA).

Rapid Assessment Framework (RAF)

The RAF is a suite of guidelines that focus on each step of the assessment process for major projects. The RAF aims to streamline major project assessment, provide clear guidance for project applicants on what a robust and thorough environmental impact assessment looks like, and introduced the scheme, which, as noted above, is intended to provide quality assurance for EIS's.

²⁰ Major projects (or projects that are of State significance) are typically complex, have a high capital investment value, and/or have been triggered by one or more significant environmental impact aspects. Determination of major projects is made by the Department, Minister, or Independent Planning Commission.

²¹ shared-drupal-s3fs.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/master-test/fapub_pdf/Lisa+Drupal+Documents/GD1944+Rapid+Assessment+Framework+REAP+final_13_09.pdf

The scheme originated from the NSW Government's desire to ensure high quality EISs are prepared for major projects, to improve confidence in the outcomes of the assessments and to allow them to move more efficiently through the planning process

In summary, the RAF improvements are:

- ready-made/standard Secretary's Environmental Assessment Requirements (SEARS)²² for some sectors to make the terms of reference of an EIS clearer and more efficient;
- new EIA guidelines²³ to better explain the requirements of each stage and improve the quality of assessments and documentation;
- enhanced quality assurance for environmental assessment via the scheme²⁴; and practitioners;
- a 2-year expiry for SEARs, to ensure EIS's are always based on current considerations.

These improvements were enabled by amendments to the NSW *Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation 2021*.

Compliance and accountability

Accredited REAP schemes have established ethical or professional codes of conduct that REAPs must adhere to. If anyone is dissatisfied with the conduct or behaviour of a REAP, they can lodge a complaint with the organisation to whom the REAP belongs. Depending

on the nature of the complaint, the organisation may investigate the complaint in accordance with its complaints policies and procedures, and decide whether any disciplinary action is warranted. This includes withdrawing certification of a REAP.

Supply and demand

One of the Department's initial concerns was whether there would be enough IA practitioners to undertake the REAP reviews of EISs. The first REAPs under the CEnvP scheme started to become certified from September 2021, ahead of the requirement for all EISs to be signed off by a REAP coming into effect on 1 July 2022.

As of June 2024, 50 REAPs had been certified through CEnvP and 126 through the PIA process. Given, on average, around 90 EISs are submitted each year for major projects, there is a more than adequate supply of REAPs to meet the current required demand.

First year Review

In June 2023, the initial review of the REAP scheme after one year of operation found:

- that the scheme's management and governance arrangements appear to be working effectively;
- the eligibility criteria for REAPs was appropriate; and
- opportunities for improvement including:
 - streamlining the certification process,
 - offering more continuing professional development for REAPs,
 - supporting a REAP community of practice, and
 - reporting on overall EIS quality over time.

²² Streamlining major project assessment | Planning (nsw.gov.au)

²³ Improving assessment guidance | Planning (nsw.gov.au)

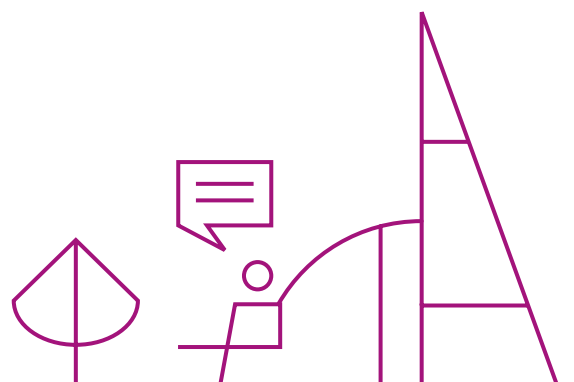
²⁴ Registered Environmental Assessment Practitioner scheme | Planning (nsw.gov.au)

What's next?

The effectiveness of the NSW REAP scheme is being keenly observed by industry and environmental regulators in other jurisdictions across Australia. There is the potential to expand the scheme to other forms of development assessment, or into specific technical disciplines such as social impact assessment. Further, we may see similar requirements introduced in other Australian states or territories. For example, the Northern Territory Environment Protection Regulations already provide the mechanism for this to occur.

There is no question that the implementation of mandatory requirements by regulators will significantly increase the interest among IA practitioners in certification. The REAP scheme initiated a substantial increase in the number of practitioners seeking CEnvP Impact Assessment Specialist certification. A similar increase was seen with the CEnvP Site Contamination Specialist certification when environment protection agencies made this a mandatory requirement.

In 2025, the Department will undertake a thorough review of the scheme, and the resultant EISs, to ensure it is meeting its objectives. Indications are promising and the REAP scheme continues to enjoy strong support across the profession, the Department and the community.



Do you make effective use of ALL of IEMA's IA member resources?

IEMA's website contains a treasure trove of IA related content, as well as information about IEMA's volunteer network groups, blogs, webinars and policy. But not everyone makes the most of this free member content, including:

- Future events and webinars.
- Recordings of past webinars, with over 24 hours' worth of IA content.
- IA Guidance & advice: such as the recent guides on Land and Soils, GHGs, Health in EIA, Traffic and Movement, the Digital EIA Roadmap, and the Mitigation Hierarchy.
- The Proportionate EIA Strategy.
- Over 400 EIA articles and 200 case studies related to EIA, developed by Q Mark registrants in recent years.
- Individual and organisational recognition specific to EIA, through the EIA Register and EIA Quality Mark schemes respectively.
- Opportunities to get involved with:
 - IA Steering Group
 - IA Network and Working Groups
 - Geographic/Regional Groups

www.iema.net



Summary

The articles included in this edition of Outlook showcase the importance of competency and capability for effective IA practice and for enabling high quality professionals. A key for me, from across the articles, is not just the need to understand what competencies are important to the IA field, but also how important it is for all parties to be aware of these and seek to improve their own capabilities and the capabilities of those around them throughout the course of a career. And if you take just one thing from Volume 22, I would hope it is that if we can all invest a little more time and thought into improving capabilities—in ourselves, our teams, our use of technology/other advances—and with those we must collaborate with to deliver an effective IA, then we will see further improvements in the effectiveness of IA practice and help deliver the developments needed to enable the transition in our economy and society.

And finally... While deliberately not a focus of Volume 22 as—I hope—they are already well known to IEMA members and those in practice, it is of course worth noting that the Institute has its own EIA competency certification systems that have been running for many years.

The oldest of its two IA certifications, which must now have been operating for over twenty years, is its recognition scheme for individual professionals: the EIA Practitioner Register²⁵, with its three levels of Associate, Registered and Principal. I developed and founded IEMA's other EIA registration scheme – for organisations – the EIA Quality Mark²⁶, which launched back in 2011 and has more than fifty UK EIA coordinating organisations registered with it; that scheme having arisen from the ashes of a prior corporate EIA registration process. Finally, I should also recognise that Volume 22 is the IA Outlook Journal's second visit to this critical aspect of effective IA practice. In May 2021 Amy Robinson (Director EIA at RPS) guest edited Volume 9, which focused on *Careers and Skills* and is still worth a read and can be found on the IA Outlook hub page:

²⁵ See: www.iema.net/membership/specialist-registers/eia-practitioners

²⁶ See: www.iema.net/corporate-programmes/eia-quality-mark

www.iema.net/policy-and-practice/impact-assessment-outlook-journal.

My last thought, for those for whom this edition has proved an interesting read—and perhaps served as an inspiration for your next steps in developing an IA oriented career—is to remind all members that there are always opportunities to get involved with IEMA's volunteer groups that work tirelessly to advance IA practice. So why not take the chance to learn more about IEMA's volunteer driven IA Network and its sub-groups across marine, significance, digital, health, strategic IA and many more. Learn more, or subscribe to the IA Newsletter here:

www.iema.net/policy-and-practice/impact-assessment.

Josh Fothergill
September 2024



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IEMA's EIA Quality Mark: A scheme operated by the Institute allowing organisations (both developers and consultancies) that lead the co-ordination of statutory EIAs in the UK to make a commitment to excellence in their EIA activities and have this commitment independently reviewed. Founded in 2011, the EIA Quality Mark is a voluntary scheme, with organisations free to choose whether they are ready to operate to its seven EIA Commitments: EIA Management; EIA Team Capabilities; EIA Regulatory Compliance; EIA Context & Influence; EIA Content; EIA Presentation; and Improving EIA practice.

Competency and Certification in Impact Assessment

This twenty-second edition of the Impact Assessment Outlook Journal provides a series of thought pieces on IA related competency, capability and related approaches to recognition/registration. In this edition, the Guest Editor, Josh Fothergill, has selected eleven articles produced by IEMA professionals and Impact Assessment experts. The result is a valuable yet quick read across some of the different aspects of UK and international practice exploring competency and certification in Impact Assessment.

About the Guest Editor: Josh Fothergill

FIEMA CEnv

Founder & Director – Fothergill Training & Consulting Ltd



Josh founded Fothergill Training & Consulting to provide independent expertise and capacity building services and has trained over 1000 IA professionals over the last 5 years. He is the lead author of both *The Global State of Digital IA Practice* (2021) and *Enabling Digital EIA in Nigeria* (2024). Josh acts as intelligent client providing oversight and direction to complex IA processes and has regularly led in-depth reviews into IA systems, including: the UK's Proportionate EIA Strategy (2017), Global EIA Accreditation Systems (2019), and *Linking the Circular Economy & IA* (2021). He previously spent nearly a decade at IEMA (2008 – 2017) co-authoring much of the UK's IA guidance over that period, and founding both the global award-winning EIA Quality Mark scheme and IA volunteers Network.



About IEMA

We are the global professional body for over 21,000 individuals and 300 organisations working, studying or interested in the environment and sustainability.

We are the professional organisation at the centre of the sustainability agenda, connecting business and individuals across industries, sectors and borders.

We also help and support public and private sector organisations, governments and regulators to do the right thing when it comes to environment and sustainability related initiatives, challenges and opportunities. We work to influence public policy on environment and sustainability matters. We do this by drawing on the insights and experience of our members to ensure that what happens in practice influences the development of government policy, legislation, regulations and standards.

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