From Graduate to EIA Coordinator – reflection on one year in the industry

Throughout my 5 years of university I always took an interest in environmental policy modules, particularly those covering EIA. It was evident, if used effectively how integral the EIA process is for ensuring sustainability and environmental protection is entwined within development. As a result, once graduating I decided to pursue a career within the industry and am currently just over 1 year into my role as a Graduate Environmental Planner, training to become an EIA Project Manager.

Having spent 1 year in the industry it is fair to say that during university I was quite naive as to how diverse and how much knowledge and how many skills are required to become a fully-fledged EIA project manager. Many people not directly involved within the EIA industry have a perception that the role is limited to EIA itself, thus if you have good knowledge of relevant legislation and its applications then your good to go... yet this is only part of the story.

I have learnt so much, yet I feel there is still a long road ahead. Coming into the industry I had fundamental knowledge and experience of EIA associated with my degrees. This experience was primarily policy based and learning about the stages of EIA, along with practical experience as is covered within many general environmental degrees.

Whilst acknowledging an educational background of EIA policy, procedures etc. is integral to obtain a holistic understanding of the process, I feel that supplementing this knowledge with business orientated skills such as project management (i.e. Client management, budgeting, organisation, communication etc.) is valuable, nearing on essential to future students coming into the industry. These are skills you will use day to day within the role. This requirement can be seen in EIA job advertisements today, with nearly all asking for some form of project management experience, even at junior levels.

Whilst I acknowledge that Environmental Assessment degrees are likely to cover these skills in more detail, being tailored to the industry, these degrees are few and far between. So, from my experience, completing a more general environmental BSc/MSc, more emphasis could have been placed on these skills, and would have provided a valuable head start in not only this industry but would also be transferrable into other industries. Perhaps it would be a good subject for IEMA to reference in some form as I am sure it would prove useful to many students/junior environmental professionals.

Education aside, despite my limited experience I have been fortunate enough to have had input into all stages of the EIA process which has allowed me to see that there are areas of EIA that could be improved to fulfil its intended value.
Firstly, due to the nature of projects requiring consideration and subsequent completion of an EIA, the process can be highly scrutinised and quite often subject to legal review and challenge. I believe this perceived fear is one of the contributing factors to both increasing the number of ES’s and causing these to become such huge documents, purely with the intention of preventing anything coming back to bite later down the line. In some respect with the threat of legal challenge, this is understandable, but this is no good for anyone, particularly the individuals who must review these voluminous documents. Furthermore, future environmentalists may portray the EIA industry as ‘paper heavy’ which may even be a factor that discourages future graduates getting into the industry and may opt to follow an alternative career path.

With the release of IEMA’s Proportionate EIA strategy in 2017, we are starting to address this issue and as EIA consultants and members of IEMA EIA Quality Mark we are continually promoting and implementing this strategy to streamline EIA. However, for the strategy to take full hold, EIA consultants, councils, developers and technical consultants must work harmoniously and actively apply a proportionate mindset to EIA. This includes using the EIA process as a tool as oppose to a procedural ‘hurdle’ and realising that by using it effectively can save both time and money whilst still complying with environmental policy.

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