After three years of studying at university for a degree in planning, I am now undertaking a year-out placement at an environmental consultancy before returning to university for one year for completion of the MPlan.

Just six weeks into my placement I have learnt that Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) are an integral part of both planning applications and decision making, yet there seems to be little focus on the EIA process at university. Counter to this, colleagues on EIA specific courses have little planning content.

It is only since starting work that I have gained basic knowledge on the stages of EIA and what Environmental Statements and non-technical summaries are. During my three years of studying, EIA was covered in just one lecture as part of an Environment and Sustainability module that was undertaken in the first year of the course. Counter to this, colleagues on EIA specific courses have little planning content.

The other forms of IA briefly discussed included Strategic Environmental Assessment, Water, Ecological, Landscape & Visual and Social. After this lecture, IAs were not covered again and there was little to no mention of the terms within other modules throughout the three years.

This has left other members of the course who graduated with a BA with limited knowledge of EIAs, unless they had chosen to do their own research outside of the lecture.

In my fifth and final year at university, I have the option to specialise in either environmental planning or planning and regeneration. The environmental planning option consists of one module that introduces students to EIA through the teaching of EIA theory, the implementation of EIA in EC law and the UK and how the process can improve decision making and public participation. A real-life case study is used to provide students with an insight into EIA in practice. The module is taught by professors of the Law School and not those within Planning.

As mentioned, a decision has to be made between environmental planning and regeneration. This leaves the students who choose regeneration with the same limited knowledge of EIA as the other course members who chose to graduate after three years. One could argue that the larger regeneration schemes are the schemes that are more than likely to be subject to the EIA process, so is there scope to integrate these elements?

Part 5 of The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 require Environmental Statements to be prepared by competent experts. This ensures the quality and completeness of the document.
These competent persons are required in both Local Authority and private consultancy. Local Authority ‘experts’ are often the planning officers determining the planning applications so EIA knowledge is vital. It is acknowledged that within private consultancy there can be stand-alone EIA teams, however often EIA coordinators come from a joint planning and EIA background. From my experience to date, I think it is vital that students who want a career in planning need to graduate with a solid introduction and a good understanding of the EIA process.

The Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA) provides opportunities for universities throughout the UK to become a partner, meaning relevant courses that the university offers can become accredited by IEMA. By encouraging universities to become a partner this can provide students with a wider range of resources that may be invaluable to their learning and aid in broadening their knowledge.

On the IEMA website, there are currently only 14 universities listed as partners. Universities who offer planning degrees should be encouraged to work with IEMA to incorporate EIA into the syllabus to equip students with the knowledge that they need for their future careers. There are currently approximately 28 UK universities that are accredited to the RTPI, is there scope to partner these two professional bodies to ensure a good EIA understanding within a planning context?

Should there be a joined up approach to ensure EIA practitioners and planning officers/consultants work more closely with each other?

In my limited experience I can see the merits of there being a more joined up approach and establishing this at an early stage during higher education could be a key to this.

Louise Chadwick, Year-out Planning Placement, TEP, November 2017.