**On the Brink of Politicisation:**

**Reflections on Ethical Dilemma’s in Impact Assessment Practice**

**Abstract**

*Like any other profession impact assessment (IA) practice has its downside. Some of the pitfalls associated with IA practice sometimes relate to uncomfortable ethical issues with political undercurrents. This paper discusses an ethical dilemma encountered while carrying out an impact assessment of the Australian Federal Government’s proposed university fees deregulation policy on regional West Australians in 2015/2016. The text describes the political undertones around the research topic vis-à-vis the need to publish of the findings during a politically-charged atmosphere the time. The manner in which these sensitivities were managed is also presented briefly to serve as a guide for other IA practitioners who may find themselves in similar ethical quagmires.*

**Background**

Higher education sector in Australia is a lucrative industry. In 2016 alone, the sector contributed forty five percent of the 21.8 billion the government made from international students on visas, making the industry Australia’s third largest export, after iron ore and coal (Wells, 2017). However, concerns over Australian universities being excessively regulated and having limited prospects of competing with international universities and the fact that some local institutions were missing out on current funding led the Australian Federal Government to propose in 2014 to deregulate university fees (Australian Government, 2014c; Quiggin, 2014). If it came into effect in 2016, the economic rationalist policy would have ensured that registered higher education institutions (including public and private universities, and non-university higher education institutions) would … set their own tuition fees for Commonwealth-supported students, and the Australian Government would reduce its contribution towards tuition fees by an average of 20% for new students (Australian Government, 2014a, p.1; Australian Government, 2014b).

Several stakeholders, including opposition parties, students, academics and some sections of the public resisted the proposed policy. While various groups resisted the policy for different reasons, the most trumpeted and common reason was the notion that it would make higher education inaccessible to people from regional areas and low socioeconomic status backgrounds (see Adusei-Asante, Hancock & Awidi, 2016). This resistance played a significant role in the blocking of the Bill that would have led to the introduction of the policy twice in the Australian Senate in 2014 and 2015. After monitoring the debate on the issue for a while, we formed the view that the basis for assessing the manner in which the proposed policy would categorically impact (positively or negatively) regional students seemed rather anecdotal than empirical. As a result, we commenced a research in 2015 ostensibly to contribute to the debate on how the policy to deregulate university fees would affect regional West Australians’ access to and participation in tertiary education; the literature indicated that students from regional areas had high attrition rate nationally (Brett et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2014; Scevak, 2015).

Our study was conducted in three regional locations in Western Australia, using qualitative research approach involving fifty respondents (Year 12 students, parents and teachers). We found that if the policy was implemented, the lack of opportunity that currently exists in regional Western Australia would increase. Furthermore, the majority of students and parents were uninformed of the details of the policy. However, after being prompted of what the police meant, most student respondents mentioned that they would postpone their university education to save more money to pay their fees to avoid being heavily indebted. We concluded that the majority of the respondents feared that if university fee deregulation came into effect in Australia it would worsen rural and regional isolation and the already low level of interest in higher education in regional communities. We recommended that the Federal Government needed to provide residents in regional and remote Western Australia more education on the proposed university-fee deregulation policy (see Adusei-Asante, Hancock & Awidi, 2016).

**The dilemma**

Our study confirmed the fears of opponents of the proposed university fees policy. However, the time to release the report coincided with the Australian 2016 federal elections. While our study was scientific we were concerned that the media and the opposition political parties would latch onto our study to political gains. While such a move could catapult us into the limelight, we had concerns that the research team could also become targets of political rebuttals and potentially set us up for career torpedoing. In fact, although the government announced few months to the election that it had suspended its decision to deregulate university fees until the next election, the opposition political party kept attacking the government that the policy was not good for Australia (Anderson, 2015; Conifer, 2016).

After thinking through the potential repercussions, we resolved not to release the report until after the federal elections. When the election drew near the pressure and anxiety to ride on the tides of the political campaign with our research findings even became stronger. In fact, some close acquaintances accused us of being cowards and doing Australians disservice by holding on to the report. Some argued that as scientists we had a duty to report our findings anytime and anywhere and be prepared to be martyred, if necessary.

**Resolution**

The first strategy for resolving the dilemma was to seek counsel from senior colleagues and impact assessment professionals, many of who advised that releasing the report after election would be ideal. When the pressure to release the report increased, we spoke to a media consultant who also confirmed that the timing and atmosphere were not conducive, and that we could play into hands of the opposition political parties and the media.

The other strategy was introspective reflections. As the lead researcher on the team, I gave careful thoughts to potential consequences and career risks that could follow our release of the report. Clearly, the report could become a tool in the hands of the media and opposition political parties. Indeed, this was an opportunity to be gain fame, but I looked at the fact that I was only starting my research career and could not risk being shot down by political arrows. I felt I needed to more weight in the field before exposing myself to such political vagaries.

We also gave consideration to the sensitivities around university fees deregulation and the how it had led to chaotic situations South Africa, for example. We examined our motive for doing the research after all, and resolved that it related more to knowledge production than wading into a political frenzy.

The next strategy was to test the waters by sharing excerpts of the findings with some key institutions and at conferences. Most of the feedback we received indicated that the findings were very insightful and that government needed to rethink the policy. We shared portions of the findings at the 2016 IAIA conference in Nagoya, Japan after which we became even more resolute that the topic was “too hot” to be released at the time, as my presentation generated passionate discussions.

**Lessons learned**

We released the report after the elections. A media released was put on the findings, and in a matter of hours, we received calls from several media outlets in Western Australia expressing interest in the findings. We granted interviews to media outlets, some of who made it their headline stories. We also sent a copy of the report to the Federal Minister of Education, whose office thanked us for the study and impliedly indicated that they would consider it in when the policy was revisited.

Although the research was released after the election, it still had a great effect. While acknowledging that every researcher wants his/her research to make an impact, timing is important. We saw a window of opportunity to ride on a political tide with our research, but realised that with quick fame comes quick failure. Introspective reflections, sharing excerpts of the findings at conferences and more importantly, speaking to senior colleagues were informed our decision to release our findings after the political climate had quietened. If there is any lesson we learnt it is the fact that being strategic about timing is important in impact assessment practice.

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