

On the Brink of Politicisation: Reflections on Ethical Dilemma's in Public Policy Impact Assessment Practice

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Abstract

Like any other profession, impact assessment (IA) practice has its problematic aspects. Some of the pitfalls associated with IA practice relate to uncomfortable ethical issues with political undercurrents. This paper discusses an ethical dilemma encountered while carrying out an IA of the Australian federal government's proposed university fees deregulation policy on regional West Australians in 2015–16. The article describes the political undertones around the research topic vis-à-vis the need to publish the findings during the politically charged atmosphere of the time. The manner in which these sensitivities were managed is also presented briefly, to serve as a guide for early career public policy IA practitioners who may find themselves in similar ethical quagmires.

Background

The higher education sector in Australia is a lucrative industry. In 2016 alone, the sector contributed 45% of the \$21.8 billion the government collected from international students on visas, making the industry Australia's third largest export, after iron ore and coal, and the largest export industry for the state of Victoria (Tyler, 2014; 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 believed to be missing out on current funding led the Australian federal government to propose in 2014 to deregulate university fees (Australian Government, 2014c; Quiggin, 2014). Under the policy, formulated under the auspices of economic rationality, 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, 2014b).

Stakeholders, including opposition parties, students, academics and some sections of the public, resisted the proposed policy. While groups resisted the policy for varying 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 in the Australian

Senate twice, in 2014 and 2015. After monitoring the debate, we formed the view that the basis for assessing the manner in which the proposed policy would categorically have an impact (positive or negative) on regional students seemed anecdotal rather than empirical. As a result, we commenced research in 2015 aimed at contributing 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 rates nationally (Brett et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2014; Scevak et al., 2015).

Our study was conducted in three regional locations in Western Australia, using a qualitative research approach involving 50 respondents (Year 12 students, parents and teachers). We found that if the policy were implemented, the lack of opportunity that currently exists in regional Western Australia would increase. Further, the majority of students and parents were uninformed of the details of the policy. However, after being educated on the implications of the policy, most student respondents indicated that they would postpone their university education to save money to pay their fees and 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 provide residents in regional and remote Western Australia with further information 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 release of the report coincided with the 2016 Australian federal elections. Although our study was scientific, we were concerned that the media and the opposition political parties would latch onto our study for political gains. While such a move might have brought attention to our research, we had concerns that the research team might also become targets of political rebuttals, and that this might damage our careers. In fact, although the government announced within a few months to the election that it had suspended its decision to deregulate university fees until the following election, the opposition political party maintained its attacks on the government, repeating that the policy was not good for Australia (Anderson, 2015; Conifer, 2016).

After considering the potential repercussions, we resolved not to release the report until after the federal elections. As the election drew near, the pressure and anxiety associated with the question of whether to release the research findings during the political campaign grew. Some close acquaintances accused us of being cowards, and doing Australians a disservice by withholding the report. Some argued that as scientists, we had a duty to report our findings regardless of the circumstances and should be prepared to be martyred, if necessary.

Resolution

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

The other strategy was introspective reflection. As the lead researcher on the team, I gave careful thought to the potential consequences, including risk to careers that might follow the release of the report. Clearly, the report could become a tool in the hands of the media and opposition political parties. While this was an opportunity to gain fame, I considered the fact that I was only starting my research career, and could not risk being ‘shot down by political arrows’. I felt I needed more weight in the field before exposing myself to such political vagaries.

We also considered the sensitivities around university fee increases and how associated issues had led to chaotic situations in South Africa, for example. We examined our motives for conducting the research, and found that they related more to knowledge production than to 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 the government needed to rethink the policy. We shared portions of the findings at the 2016 International Association for Impact Assessment conference in Nagoya, Japan, after which we became even more resolute that the topic was ‘too hot’ to be released at the time, as the presentation generated passionate discussion.

Lessons Learned

We released the report after the elections. A media release was circulated, and within hours, we received calls from several media outlets in Western Australia expressing interest in the findings. We granted interviews to media outlets, some of whom featured the story as their headline. We also sent a copy of the report to the Federal Minister of Education, whose office thanked us for the study and implied that they would consider it when the policy was revisited.

Although the research was released after the election, it had a great impact. While all researchers want their research to find recognition, timing is important. We were presented with a window of opportunity, during which we could have ridden the political tide, but realised that with quick fame comes quick failure. Introspective reflection and sharing excerpts of the findings at conferences informed our decision to release our findings after the political climate had quietened. The lesson we learned is that being strategic about timing is important in IA practice.

Seniority is key in public policy IA practice. While it has no bearing on the policies a person can research or study, practitioners' professional standing may affect their confidence in reporting the outcomes or findings. As an early career academic, researching and reporting on such a highly politically sensitive policy brought me much self-inflicted worry. I overcame these concerns by seeking the guidance and mentorship of senior colleagues who validated my findings.

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