

**Author:** Blood, Alexandra

**Title:** Navigating the Antipodean Skies - the Journey to SIA Specialist certification in Australia and New Zealand

**Abstract:** *Increasingly the assumption that social is part of the environmental impact assessment profession has obscured the unique skill sets and experience required for SIA, with regulators commenting on wide variances in quality of studies, the skills of people undertaking work and the increasing risk to projects from poor planning, community trust and lost benefit enhancement opportunity. In late 2022 the Certified Environmental Practitioner (CEnvP) Scheme, an initiative of the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ), launched the first social impact assessment specialist professional certification in Australia and New Zealand, and the world.*

*Driven by discussions at IAIA19 the journey to certification involved consideration of drivers for professional certification, challenges in SIA from a government, industry and community view, as well as strategic changes to the CEnvP Scheme overall. The CEnvP approach provides a model for other countries to learn from and this paper will share insight into the strategic considerations for certification, the process and final certification requirements, as well as some of the debate about the requirements themselves. SIA practitioners can come from diverse backgrounds - consulting, academic, or industry - with many different paths to SIA. The journey to certification was in depth with many contributors and thoughts, and a brief overview of the process will be shared to support other regions that may wish to consider certification or work with CEnvP in the future.*

## Introduction

In October 2022, at the annual Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ) conference, the Certified Environmental Practitioner Scheme<sup>1</sup> (CEnvP) launched the first professional certification for social impact assessment (SIA) specialists. A milestone, this was the culmination of significant effort by many volunteer professionals and staff, and the beginning of the next phase of SIA recognition. This paper will outline the drivers, process, and challenges in establishing the certification and the requirements for professional SIA certification. Increasing community voice and complex social affects from industrial development are evident around the globe. SIA should be considered by government, consulting and industry alike, as a vital profession that delivers its best outcomes with good practice and ethical professionals; professional certification or chartership can be one step towards supporting those outcomes across the globe.

## Background

As with many things, it is good to go back to the beginning to follow the journey towards the launch. The CEnvP Scheme (the 'Scheme') was established in 2004 as an initiative of the EIANZ, and currently has over 1,200 certified professionals. The Scheme's aim is to drive ethical conduct and provide a format to demonstrate professional practice skills and experience for environmental professionals. Over time, the Scheme diversified from a general environmental professional certification to also include specialist environmental disciplines such as contaminated land, ecology, impact assessment and others.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Certified Environmental Practitioners (CEnvP) Scheme was established in 2004 as an initiative of the Environment Institute of Australia and New Zealand (EIANZ). The CEnvP Scheme is based on ISO/IEC 17024:2012 "Conformity assessment – General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons" (which is identical to AS/NZS ISO/IEC 17024:2013).

An organisational strategic vision is an important statement, as it provides the long-term picture of an organisation's goals and guides the short, medium and longer term strategy. In 2019 the CEnvP Board, made up of regulator and consulting members, revised and expanded its environmentally focused strategic vision<sup>2</sup> and purpose to recognize social practice too. This change was a significant step in organisational evolution, as the change recognised social as a distinct discipline area, rather than as an 'unseen' part of environmental practice.

This change was largely due to the recognition that social was an increasingly vital part of global modern risk management for regulators, government, and businesses alike and that consultation and social impact are a distinct specialist skill set, with different drivers, and expertise than other environmental impact fields. This step was a significant evolution of the Scheme. The Scheme's 2019 strategic review was the foundation for the commencement of the SIA certification pathway, and change was reflected in the 2020-2025 strategic plan.

Since the early 2010s an emerging trend was evident of greater government prescription in SIA guidance in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) and the Australian states of Queensland (QLD) and New South Wales (NSW). NZ, as they persistently do in rugby union, beat Australia to the punch, with the 2015 release of the NZ Transport Agency's State Highway SIA Guide<sup>3</sup>. In Australia, the 2017 drafting by NSW government of a SIA guideline for significant development projects was driven by government concerns of obvious variances in SIA quality within applications for assessment, and the array of different profession types preparing SIAs, that seemed to align with poor or good quality work. Around this time, a SIA working group was established within the EIANZ membership by existing social professionals from academic, consulting and regulatory settings, recognizing a need for their own network, professional development and career needs, and for greater recognition of SIA practice.

In May 2020, the globally reported Juukan Gorge incident and related industry reputation damage<sup>4</sup> along with the increasing focus on the social 'S' in ESG (environment, social and governance) also contributed to accelerating the broader recognition that SIA is distinct from, as well as part of, environmental practice, with different skills and experience required.

SIA's importance continues to increase in other Australian state government new project development requirements, with policy, and regulation continuing to evolve in SIA expectations, but also reflected through greater community voice and backlash against projects failing to adequately understand social impacts, effects and opportunities. This can be seen in mining, oil and gas, renewable energy, infrastructure and many other project types. In 2023, South Australia refused a new mining project primarily based on potential social impacts, which was the first time such a focus and refusal has occurred.

---

<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the CEnvP is "To serve the environmental and social professional community. Deliver a trusted and leading certification scheme that provides an independent mechanism to demonstrate professional skills and high standards of conduct"

<sup>3</sup> The NZ Transport Agency is committed to act in an environmentally and socially responsible manner and this guide seeks to achieve a nationally consistent approach to carrying out SIA for highway projects at all stages of a project's life cycle. This approach is intended to provide certainty and clarity of expectations for customers and for the Agency and to appropriately deliver on commitments to social responsibility.

<https://www.nzta.govt.nz/assets/resources/guide-to-assessing-social-impacts-for-state-highway-projects/16-243-People-and-place-state-highway-social-impact-guide-2017-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The Juukan Gorge incident saw a miner in Western Australia destroy significant Australian Aboriginal heritage sites, in the 45,000+ year old rock shelters on the traditional lands of the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) people. The incident led to traditional owner and global outrage.

## SIA certification: the pathway to development

In 2019, at the Brisbane International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) conference, a robust international open forum discussion on social impact education was held. This session also saw commentary on *what is a social impact specialist? - what is the background of a working SIA professional? – recognition of the distinction from an environmental impact specialist – and the certification and differences for SIA*. This sparked discussions for both CEnvP Board members, and Australian and NZ social professionals on possible pathways to certification. At the time, other professions held differing views, asserting that SIA was not a distinct discipline and in fact, impact assessment as a specialty certification is the same regardless of environmental or social, and there was not a need for recognition.

Late 2019, a face to face meeting was held in Adelaide attended by SIA working group members and CEnvP Board members, which lead to a survey to test the appetite for certification, and possible pathways. The results showed a desire for SIA specialty recognition, and the CEnvP Board aligned with this need and supported the development of a framework. A volunteer working group of social professionals from government, academia and the private sector in conjunction with the Scheme personnel – formed a Specialist Environmental Advisory Committee, or SEAC<sup>5</sup> to commence consideration of certification requirements. This process also involved input from the Scheme, noting, as outlined below, the different perspectives in developing and maintaining professional certification. IAIA management and Board member representatives were also engaged on the intent to develop the certification and their own views on drivers and needs. IAIA also noted that international demand for SIA recognition and its importance as a professional specialty area was something they had also noted.

There are a number of challenges associated with establishing a certification, that vary depending on the viewer's perspective, and provide a healthy tension in the Scheme. From the Scheme's perspective, ensuring certification is accessible to a range of suitable practitioners and reasonable in its requirements is as much an equal part of considering development of certification types, as is maintaining a '*robust process*'<sup>6</sup> that can demonstrate a reasonable minimum standard for certification reflecting regulator, professional and other expectations, as much as possible. As always too, maintaining the Scheme's reputation for quality is another key element.

Running the Scheme (or any certification or chartership program) incurs practical costs, both financial and non-financial (such as significant unpaid volunteer hours). These costs cover the assessment process, ongoing advice, and certification standard reviews, as well as budget for operations, improvements, and staff. Additionally, it is essential for any organisation to also consider the potential number of certification applicants to ensure administrative and volunteer time costs remain reasonable over time and support the significant investment in establishing any professional certification and maintaining it over time.

---

<sup>5</sup> A 'SEAC' is a Specialist Environmental Advisory Committee. This is a term used by the CEnvP Scheme, and is a specialist committee that provides an opportunity for consultation with and involvement of stakeholders (including EIANZ and non-EIANZ members, and certified or non-certified persons). They may be from government, consultancy, business, research or tertiary institution, or industry bodies. CEnvP SEACs ensure specialist input into the formation of, standards and continuous improvement of a specialist certification. Each certification has a SEAC.

<sup>6</sup> Regulatory agencies in some Australian states require CEnvP site contamination certification or impact assessment certification (known as the Registered Environmental Assessment Practitioner Scheme or REAP) for persons signing off on reports being submitted for government assessment. Agencies are driven by their own government need for better quality of reporting, and therefore the robustness and quality of the CEnvP Scheme processes and procedures is an important stakeholder requirement.

From a practitioner perspective, diverse views exist among academics, regulators, consultants and industry persons regarding the minimum levels required to demonstrate SIA competence, or what constitutes SIA. There are also differences in views between impact assessment professionals who undertake environmental and social aspects of assessment, and SIA focused researchers or specialists who may consider much higher and more difficult standards to achieve certification are required. This tension between certification administration, reputation and stakeholder views presents a positive challenge in providing such a certification product and maintaining contemporary requirements. This is the why the SEACs were developed for CEnvP programs, as part of seeking broad and diverse viewpoints, whilst also balancing expectations and accessibility.

During 2020 and 2021, a number of meetings with CEnvP and IAIA representatives also discussed the question of balance, that is, developing a quality SIA standard, whilst not making expectations so high that many competent professionals are unable to meet them or are dissuaded by the process. Such a debate should be, and is part of, a healthy ongoing discussion for any chartership or certification product, as part of reflection, continual improvement and maintenance of contemporary expectations.

## Certification Requirements

The final certification framework for SIA went through a number of draft revisions based on working group and CEnvP input before being finalised and approved. For the Scheme, a SIA specialist is defined as a person who ensures development of socially sustainable projects and effective social outcomes for communities, and SIA is defined as the practice that “ [...] involves the processes of analysing, monitoring, and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of [...] interventions (policies, programs, plans, projects) and any social change processes invoked by those interventions” (Vanclay, 2003).

For the purposes of this certification, Social Practice refers to activities involving social research, SIA, community engagement, and social performance, with the aims of:

- Avoiding harm to people and communities
- Ensuring respect for human rights and other legal rights
- Providing equitable benefits (distributive fairness)
- Establishing and maintaining relationships of trust with stakeholders for mutual benefit (by allowing people to have voice, treating them with respect)
- Improving and enhancing social / community outcomes

Note: These were adapted from Moreira, Vanclay and Esteves 2021, and ICMM 2022.

Application requirements for SIA specialist certification include:

- A social science or environmental related degree, or other degree paired with postgraduate qualifications in a social related discipline, and evidence thereof.
  - **Note:** This is an area of differing views; some do not believe an environmental degree is sufficient, however other reputable persons have shown a professional pathway from environment into the social field either within Australia, NZ or global practice pathway. Noting the challenges described earlier, from the Scheme's perspective, the application's requirements provide evidence of practice and skills that a 'degree' is intended to demonstrate, whilst balancing accessibility and supporting quality.
  - In lieu of a suitable tertiary qualification (noting the diversity of professionals there may be in the field), an application may be taken where the following experience can be demonstrated:

- minimum of 15 years full-time equivalent (FTE) experience in social practice (including 5 years of SIA), or
  - 10 years in the functional SIA area.
- 10 years of FTE experience in social practice during the past 17 years. A minimum of 5 years must be SIA specific.
- Three experienced social or environmental professionals referees within the context of social work.
- Evidence the candidate is a respected, competent, ethical and active member of the SIA profession through:
  - Referees, curriculum vitae, work documents (SIA reports, applied studies and research etc)
  - Professional Competency question responses
  - any additional supporting material (e.g. publications or presentations)
- Evidence of the past 2 years commitment to continued professional development (CPD) and the future CPD commitment.
- A signed and witnessed statement of claim covering the application materials.

The certification outlines three key proficiencies that are expected to be demonstrated through the supplied application documents. These range from:

- **Category 1: Application of SIA;** that is, knowledge of the what, how, why and who of SIA, as well as knowledge of regulatory and other relevant SIA standards. The intent is to seek a professional whose knowledge is contemporary on approaches both theoretical, but also regulatory or leading practice policy expectations too.
- **Category 2: Social Research Methods;** that is, the how or design in undertaking the work, and also the key part indigenous knowledge can play and the bias and ethics that come into SIA's from the practitioners themselves.
- **Category 3: Interpersonal and Engagement Skills;** recognizes that SIA by its nature requires interaction with many different people and stakeholders, and people's views are a foundation of a good SIA. How SIA related interaction is designed and carried out can be more or less inclusive, and more or less respectful to different stakeholders and therefore is considered a key part of SIA as a specialty.

The certification goes further in requiring applicants to provide a written explanation that uses the proficiency areas and their supporting materials to demonstrate how they are achieving the competencies and using a case study to show how the relevant SIA was designed and carried out. This is intended to give a greater insight into an applicant's skill and experience levels. If an application is accepted an interview is undertaken, with a panel of suitable SIA or relevant professionals. The interview is intended to interrogate the application and pose ethical settings for discussion as part of seeking the quality and ethical practice, which underpins the intent of the CEnvP certification processes.

## **Close**

SIA certification has been discussed for many years, with different views and perspectives. In order to have the ability to commence such a program there are many considerations, including ensuring sufficient scope in the governance of a certification scheme and its products to support quality outcomes, robust and documented application and assessment processes and to ensure sufficient scope for inclusion of professionals to a reasonable level.

The significant contribution of volunteer time into development of certification requirements should be considered by any organisation seeking to establish certification. In addition, the administration and operational framework for any such program requires the rigour and risk management controls to sustain robust quality outcomes, whilst maintaining the financial and operational security of the organisation.

The equal opportunity and challenge is seeking and balancing differing views from professional types, whilst continuing to meet the aim to recognize the ethical practice, training and experience level of environmental and social practitioners, in order to assure governments, industry and community of their professional standing. As social risks continue to be a globally significant issue, certification can enhance professional recognition and uphold the field's reputation. The CEnvP SIA certification approach provides a model for other countries to consider adopting as part of professional recognition and promoting good practice SIA.

### **Thanks**

Many thanks go to the members of the SEAC, Scheme staff, CEnvP Board and all stakeholders that provided significant time and input to frame and develop the certification over years. The generous contribution of time and experience is vital to the past and continued success of the Scheme.

### **References**

**Certified Environmental Practitioner Scheme**, (2024) <https://www.cenvp.org/about-us/>

**Vanclay, F.** (2003) International Principles for Social Impact Assessment, *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 21:1, 5-12, DOI: 10.3152/147154603781766491

**ICMM** (2022) *Social and Economic Reporting: Framework and Guidance*, May 2022.

**Moreira, S., Vanclay, F., and Esteves, A.** (2022) Fallacies about communities that lead to failed community relations, *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 40:2, 156-167, DOI: 10.1080/14615517.2021.2008600

**New Zealand Transport Agency** (2016) *Social Impact Guide*, September 2016