

**Investigating the value and influence of informal strategic  
advice for environmental assessment in Western Australia**

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and has not previously been submitted anywhere else. Any contributions made to this research by others are appropriately acknowledged.

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Lara Martin, October 2013

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## Abstract

Formal processes for environmental assessment (EA) have been established throughout the world. In Western Australia (WA) informal strategic advice, which sits outside of the formal or legally binding project based environmental impact assessment process required for significant development proposals, has been in use for nearly two decades. Such advice, prepared by the Environmental Protection Authority under s16 of the *Environmental Protection Act* 1986, is an early form of EA intended to inform the pre-project stages of development. No previous studies have investigated this informal strategic advice in WA.

Through literature review, interviews with EA practitioners and two case studies, this research investigated the value and influence of informal non-binding strategic advice for EA in WA. While the international literature gives a limited account of the potential value and influence of informal approaches to EA, the main results were obtained from interviews with 29 practitioners who have been involved in the formulation or use of this advice in WA. The majority of those interviewed believe strategic advice is of value with respect to providing upfront early advice, greater certainty and clarity on what is acceptable (including direction and guidance to both proponents and regulatory authorities).

However a number of limitations in its use were also identified including the cost, time and resources it requires in providing advice, its currency and shelf life, uptake and issues with implementation of recommendations which are not enforceable. Provision of clear objectives, as well as improvements in the timing and relevance of advice and making more use of advice (as a guide for developers) were identified as positive ways forward.

The case studies revealed similar results with the more focused advice for a specific project or environmental issue in the early stages being held to be more favourable. Overall the results recognise the value of informal strategic advice as a means to complement formal EA and as a useful tool to assist with making better informed decisions earlier in the assessment process.

## Abbreviations/Commonly Used Terms

Abbreviation	Definition
EA	Environmental Assessment
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
<i>EP Act</i>	<i>Environmental Protection Act 1986</i>
EPA	Environmental Protection Authority
Formal	based on a legal framework; ‘following the rules’ (Cherp et al., 2007)
Informal	not formal
OEPA	Office of the Environmental Protection Authority
PPP	Policy, plan and program
SEA	Strategic Environmental Assessment
Section 16(e) ( <i>EP Act 1986</i> )	<u>16. Functions of Authority</u> – (e) to advise the Minister on environmental matters generally and on any matter which he may refer to it for advice, including the environmental protection aspects of any proposal or scheme, and on the evaluation of information relating thereto
Value	Worth, utility, importance; relative worth or importance (Krebs, 1984)
WA	Western Australia

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