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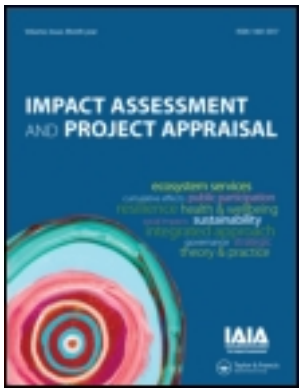

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Policy assessment: the state of the art

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Policy assessment: the state of the art

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Policy assessment has spread rapidly around the world in the last few decades providing an opportunity for further innovation and understanding in the way in which assessment is conceived, practised and researched. The extension of assessment from project and programme level to policy level was in part intended to improve its effectiveness by moving the focus of study upstream in the policy-making process. This paper reflects on the state of the art in policy assessment. It illustrates how the diffusion of policy assessment has led not to one standard 'correct' way of conducting policy assessment but to a great deal of diversity in how policy assessment is practised as well as researched and even theorized. Although the 'textbook' concept and everyday practices of policy assessment are based on a traditional rational linear concept of policy-making, policy assessment has become the latest arena for post-positivist conceptions of policy-making and assessment to resurface. This paper suggests that the future agenda for both research and practices could – indeed should – attempt to straddle these two theoretical approaches.

Keywords: policy assessment; policy appraisal; regulatory impact assessment; better regulation; evidence-based policy-making

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Introduction

Policy assessment seeks to inform decision-makers by predicting and evaluating the potential impacts of policy options. It is the latest extension of the assessment concept, namely from the project and/or programme level to the *policy* level. This extension has in part been driven by criticisms that project and programme level appraisals, that is environmental impact assessment (EIA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA), do not start early enough in the policy cycle (Boothroyd 1995, Owens *et al.* 2004). Policy assessment essentially uses the same standard steps as EIA and SEA (i.e. identifying the problem, defining objectives, identifying policy options, analysing impacts etc.) which are often applied within central government departments or ministries to national level policies. The scope of policy assessment is usually (and certainly for the purposes of this paper) confined to '*ex ante*' assessment, which informs decision-making *before* policies are agreed and implemented and therefore excludes '*ex post*' evaluation of policies (Palumbo 1987).

Policy assessment is most commonly practised as one of several types of 'impact assessment' that have emerged in the last two decades, such as regulatory impact assessment (RIA) (e.g. Radaelli 2004a), sustainability impact assessment (SIA) (e.g. Kirkpatrick and Lee 2001) and simply impact assessment (IA) (e.g. European Commission 2002). Each has a slightly different focus in terms of objectives and relevant impacts but the terms are often used interchangeably, creating some confusion. These broad types of policy assessment in turn harness a range of policy assessment tools and methods such as cost–benefit analysis (CBA), scenario analysis and computer modelling (de Ridder *et al.* 2007, Nilsson *et al.* 2008).

The concept of policy assessment (i.e. the idea in its textbook form) has spread rapidly around the world in the last two decades (Radaelli 2004a). In the early 1990s only a few OECD countries were using policy assessment, but by 2008 all 31 OECD countries had either adopted or were in the process of adopting it (OECD 2009). Policy assessment systems (i.e. the institutionalization of the concept through standard operating procedures such as guidelines, training, quality control etc.) in their various guises (i.e. RIA, SIA and IA) can now be found in almost every European Union (EU) member state and in countries as far apart as the USA, Australia and South Africa (Allio 2008). However, this broad diffusion of the concept of policy assessment masks a great deal of diversity in how it is practised (Radaelli and Meuwese 2010). Policy assessment systems in different countries vary enormously in their design, implementation and even their purpose (Jacob *et al.* 2008, Adelle *et al.* 2011). For example, environmental objectives may or may not be a significant feature of a policy assessment system, if present at all. Furthermore, in some countries policy assessment exists only on paper and is rarely and/or poorly implemented in practice.

This paper sets out the state of the art in policy assessment by reflecting on both the *concept* and *practices* of policy assessment. In addition, this paper is also about *research* on the concepts and practices of assessment. The rest of the paper unfolds as follows. First, the origins and drivers behind the concept of assessment are examined. Then, the question of how, and why, the practice of policy assessment spread around the world under its various

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guises is discussed. This is followed by an exploration of the several 'types' of research on policy assessment that have been differentiated. These have varying perspectives, objectives and methodologies, as well as underlying assumptions about the concept of policy assessment. This leads us to reflect, in the next section, on the state of play and possible future directions for these three dimensions of policy assessment (i.e. concept, practices and research). The paper ends with some conclusions on how to better integrate these three dimensions of policy assessment in order to expedite and strengthen future developments in the field.

Policy assessment: the origins of the concept

The concept of policy assessment – in its textbook form – is based on the belief that more 'rational' policy-making can be achieved by applying analytical tools. Therefore assessment exists to bring scientific evidence to the attention of decision-makers and counter interest-based policy-making, to integrate cross-cutting issues, and to increase cooperation between different departments which are involved in the assessment of a policy. This conception of policy assessment is widespread and particularly evident in the guidance documents prepared for government officials who carry out policy assessment.

The origins of this concept of policy assessment can be traced back to the USA, which is often reported as one of the first adopters of policy assessment, and is still sometimes held up as being at the forefront of international practice (e.g. Renda 2006, p. 19). Various points of genesis of policy assessment in the USA have been divined but a complete policy assessment system is commonly cited to have first been instituted through an Executive Order (Number 12291) in 1981 (Renda 2006, Radaelli 2010). Economic priorities figured strongly in these early experiences of policy assessment with the reduction of regulatory burden and cost savings seen as the main drivers in the USA (Renda 2006). References to the earlier adopted US concept of policy assessment are apparent in the European literature (e.g. Renda 2006, Cecot *et al.* 2007, Radaelli 2009, European Court of Auditors 2010). However, the concept of policy assessment in Europe and other OECD countries is commonly reported to be driven by three specific global trends.

First, as noted above, the need for a more strategic approach arose from the apparent inability of existing assessment schemes to deal with 'big issues' at the project level (Boothroyd 1995, p. 93). The focus of assessment, therefore, moved upstream to plans and programmes and then to policies. However, it is the second trend, the rise of 'better regulation' up the political agenda, that has arguably been the main driving force behind the diffusion of policy assessment in the OECD (Jacobs 2006, Allio 2007, Radaelli 2007). Better regulation refers to the notion of attempting to rationalize and simplify both existing and new legislation (Allio 2007, p. 73). Promoted by the OECD as well as certain influential high level reports, such as the Mandelkern Report published in 2001 (Mandelkern Group on Better Regulation 2001), policy assessment – in the form of RIA or IA – rapidly became the main instrument for implementing this better regulation agenda (Allio 2007, Radaelli 2007). Finally, the concept of policy assessment also arose out of calls for the integration of environmental objectives or more broadly sustainability objectives into policy-making (Hertin *et al.* 2008). The concept of policy assessment has the potential to contribute to solving complex cross-cutting issues such as sustainable development because it requires officials to take these issues into consideration at the initial stages of decision-making across the whole of government (Jacob *et al.* 2008, Russel and Jordan 2009). However, in practice such a holistic concept is difficult to achieve.

The practice of policy assessment: the diffusion of a concept

The diffusion of the concept of policy assessment into worldwide practice can usefully be split into two elements: first the adoption of policy assessment systems (i.e. the institutionalization of the concept through standard operating procedures such as guidelines, training, quality control etc.) and, second, the implementation of those policy assessment systems. It is important to note that the presence of a policy assessment system does not necessarily lead to its functional implementation, and in some countries a large gap between the policy assessment system and assessment practice exists.

The adoption of policy assessment systems

Despite the early origins of policy assessment in countries such as the USA, the practice spread only slowly at first, with Finland and Canada adopting some form of policy assessment system in the 1970s and Australia, the UK, the Netherlands and Germany following in the mid 1980s (OECD 2009). There was, however, a rapid rise in adoption of policy assessment systems in OECD and European countries in the second half of the 1990s following an OECD recommendation on regulatory reform (OECD 1995). Another surge in the diffusion of policy assessment systems occurred following the launch of the European Commission's Impact Assessment system in 2003 (European Commission 2002). As in the USA, many of the early policy assessment systems initially focused on the assessment of economic and administrative impacts of regulation but were later revised to include consideration of a wider range of impacts. For example, the UK introduced a Compliance Cost Assessment procedure in 1986 to reduce compliance costs for business but from 1996 this procedure was gradually transformed into a broader 'regulatory assessment', emerging in 1998 as a full RIA procedure (EVIA 2008). The focus of policy assessment in the USA, however, remains relatively narrow and dominated by the use of CBA (Renda 2006, p. 22).

Today the adoption of a policy assessment system is widespread in OECD and other industrialized countries. A survey conducted in 2010 of 17 European countries found that all 17 had adopted some form of policy

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assessment system, although some countries were still in the early stages of implementation (Adelle *et al.* 2011). The most recent countries to adopt policy assessment have tended to be newer EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) such as Estonia and Lithuania (de Francesco 2010), although there are some late-adopter exceptions such as Ireland, which introduced its system in 2005 (Adelle *et al.* 2011). There are also early CEE adopters like Hungary, which established a policy assessment system in 1994 (Staronova 2010). Recent adoption appears to be one of the predictors of weak implementation of policy assessment systems, with many of the more sophisticated and robust systems being found in the older EU member states. This reflects the dynamic nature of most assessment systems, which are repeatedly revised and refined over time.

Policy assessment systems have now also spread beyond OECD and the EU (de Francesco 2010). In particular, interest in policy assessment in middle and lower income countries is increasing, albeit from a relatively low base (Kirkpatrick and Parker 2004, Kirkpatrick *et al.* 2004). Furthermore, the World Bank has recently promoted SEA in *policy* and sector reform as a means for developing countries to deliver policies which not only foster employment but also growth that is environmentally sustainable (World Bank 2011).

This widespread diffusion of the concept and institutional framework for policy assessment has not, however, led to its standardization. Radaelli (2005, p. 924) argues that policy assessment (in the form of RIA) is a concept which has 'travelled lightly' around the world producing 'diffusion without convergence'. Essentially most policy assessment systems draw on certain common elements: they are often (but not always) supported by a legislative act making their application mandatory and specifying which policy proposals are subject to assessment; they consist of similar procedural steps set out in official 'guidance' documents; they are usually undertaken by the official responsible for policy development; they generally include some form of stakeholder consultation; and they usually result in a written document or report. However, these common features disguise the many different ways policy assessment is implemented in practice.

The implementation of policy assessment systems

A number of comparative surveys of European policy assessment systems have revealed the detail of this vast diversity in practice. They have uncovered different institutional frameworks, purposes of assessment, use of policy assessment tools, coverage of impacts, quality of reports and levels of transparency, as well as the differing role of assessment within the policy process (e.g. Jacob *et al.* 2008, Adelle *et al.* 2011). Through these surveys it becomes apparent that while the concept and practice of policy assessment has been fully institutionalized in some jurisdictions (sometimes in less than a decade, e.g. in the European Commission) it still suffers from significant implementation problems in others (Jacob *et al.* 2008, Radaelli and de Francesco 2010, Adelle *et al.* 2011). In some cases policy assessment only exists on paper as a 'tick-box' exercise (Radaelli 2005).

Consequently, Adelle *et al.* (2011) conclude that there is no 'one way' of conducting policy assessment, or even one 'best way'. Having said that, the European Commission's Impact Assessment system is often held up as a front runner in policy assessment in Europe. It is considered a very integrated assessment system as it includes social, economic and environmental impacts (both inside and outside the EU) of the EU's most significant policies (European Commission 2009, European Court of Auditors 2010). However, the EU's integrated model is only followed in a few European countries (Jacob *et al.* 2008). Adelle *et al.* (2011) found that environmental objectives are considered to be an integral part of relatively few European assessment systems. In fact, some authors report that two main types of policy assessment are emerging in practice across OECD and European countries, namely, on the one hand, a 'stripped down' or 'soft' version of CBA in which countries try to identify interactive effects of policies (e.g. in the European Commission, Australia, Ireland and New Zealand), and, on the other hand, a more fragmented and narrow form of policy assessment focusing on assessment of administrative burdens on business (e.g. the Netherlands, Germany) (Jacobs 2006, Jacob *et al.* 2008). The strong emphasis on economic competitiveness which became associated with the EU's better regulation agenda in the mid 2000s (Allio 2007), compounded by the recent economic crisis, only serves to intensify this latter trend (Jacobs 2006, Radaelli 2009).

Radaelli (2005) attempted to further explore the diversity in the practice of policy assessment by examining how institutional and political context matters in the process of its diffusion. He argues that policy assessment has become a 'typical solution in search of its problem' (Radaelli 2004a, p. 734) and that the problem depends on the political context of each jurisdiction. For example, in Italy, Germany and Sweden policy assessment is perceived as a possible solution to the need for simplification of policy, and in the Netherlands it is associated with the issue of competitiveness, while the European Commission's policy assessment is a response to a legitimacy deficit (Radaelli 2005). Furthermore, experience of the practice of policy assessment is beginning to indicate even more diversity to be found beneath the surface: not only can the purpose of policy assessment differ between jurisdictions but also within a particular policy assessment system depending on the policy sector, prevailing political priorities and even the individual policy process and stakeholders in question. The argument that political context matters when determining the purpose of policy assessment has strong parallels in the SEA literature. For example, Bina (2007) argues that it would help frame the purpose, role and approach to SEA in a way that is relevant and consistent with the particular context if policy-makers asked themselves what they want to achieve from each particular application of SEA.

To summarize, policy assessment has become a tool for many purposes: different practices, objectives and perspectives have been rolled up with the concept of policy assessment. The next section introduces even more diversity in another (third) dimension of policy assessment, namely the research on the concept and practices.

Research on policy assessment: reflections on practice

The diffusion of the concept and practice of policy assessment has been accompanied by a vast amount of academic, as well as more applied, research. This section of the paper sets out some of this research. To do so we draw on the typology devised by Turnpenny *et al.* (2009) that divides the literature into several different 'types'. The first two types share a mainly positivist perspective, that is they base the concept of policy-making on a rational model of linear knowledge transfer between experts and policy-makers. The third and fourth types, in contrast, are largely based on an alternative, post-positivist perspective that stresses the relativity of knowledge and the political nature of policy formation, thereby focusing on other factors such as interests and power positions, rather than evidence, to explain political decisions. We will subsequently elaborate on each of the four research types.

The design of assessment

One type of policy assessment literature concerns the design of the policy assessment systems themselves. There is a vast amount of often very technical literature on tools and methods for policy assessment (for a useful meta-review, see de Ridder *et al.* 2007). It includes literature aiming to improve the overall design of assessment systems (e.g. Lee 2006, OECD 2008) as well as detailed and practical guidance for practitioners carrying out assessments (e.g. European Commission 2009). A substantial volume of literature focuses on specific tools that can be used in assessment, such as CBA (e.g. Pearce 1998), the standard cost model (e.g. Torriti 2007) or multi-criteria analysis (e.g. Hajkowicz and Collins 2006). Computer-based modelling tools developed for particular policy sectors or problems have also been the subject of significant research, for example in the field of agriculture and land use (e.g. Alkan Olsson *et al.* 2009) and transport (Elst *et al.* 2005). In addition, several large, EU-funded projects (such as IQ-Tools,[1] Sustainability A-Test,[2] MATISSE,[3] EVIA[4] and LIAISE[5]) have developed online inventories of policy assessment tools.

The performance of assessment

Another type of literature evaluates policy assessment designs in practice. While at first this research measured quality by comparing the *contents* of the assessment reports with the official guidance (e.g. Harrington *et al.* 2000), later research emphasized aspects of the *process* of assessment by including in-depth case studies and interviews (e.g. The Evaluation Partnership 2007). This type of research generated a fairly consistent, if disappointing, picture of the empirical 'reality' of policy assessment. Many of the criticisms chimed with those previously made by researchers evaluating the (mainly procedural) effectiveness of SEA (e.g. Bina 2007, Wallington *et al.* 2007). These are that: there is a gap between the stated aims of assessment and its everyday implementation (Wilkinson *et al.* 2004); the economic aspects of policy all too easily outweigh other (e.g. social and environmental) aspects (Wilkinson *et al.* 2004, Renda 2006, Russel and Jordan 2007, Jacob *et al.* 2008); the scope of the assessments is confined by a narrow understanding of problems and available policy options (Wilkinson *et al.* 2004, Lee and Kirkpatrick 2006, Nielsen *et al.* 2006, Renda 2006); and assessments tend to be performed at a relatively late stage in the policy process (i.e. too late to have significant influence over the final decisions) (Wilkinson *et al.* 2004, The Evaluation Partnership 2007, Russel and Turnpenny 2008).

Many of these researchers focused on the sustainability aspects of policy assessment and were strongly critical of their lack of integration into the assessments (Wilkinson *et al.* 2004, Adelle *et al.* 2006, Jacob *et al.* 2008). Russel and Jordan (2009, p. 341) described the growing concern that 'rather than supporting sustainable development, more integrated approaches to assessment could actually undermine the concept as environmental and social issues may get squeezed out by more high profile and politically salient economic concerns'. This fear was compounded as the competitiveness agenda in Europe strengthened in the years after the introduction of the EU's policy assessment system. This was believed to have the effect of narrowing down of the most salient issues, principally in favour of economic ones (Jacobs 2006).

Most studies offered recommendations to policy-makers on how to improve the performance of their policy assessment systems. Many of these recommendations focused on micro-level constraints, such as calls for more resources and training for practitioners (Wilkinson *et al.* 2004, Jacobs 2006, The Evaluation Partnership 2007). Another common recommendation was to start the policy appraisal earlier in the policy process, when more options were likely to be open (Wilkinson *et al.* 2004, Renda 2006, The Evaluation Partnership 2007). The need to address higher level constraints was also emphasized, for example through calls for stronger political leadership (Russel and Jordan 2007, Jacob *et al.* 2008); the creation of central oversight and quality control mechanisms (Wilkinson *et al.* 2004, The Evaluation Partnership 2007); and a greater understanding, acceptance and use of assessment tools (de Ridder *et al.* 2007, Jacob *et al.* 2008, Nilsson *et al.* 2008, Turnpenny *et al.* 2008). These higher level recommendations proved much harder to implement, which may in part help explain why the quality of some policy assessment systems was initially reported to decrease rather than increase over time (Renda 2006). However, this trend appears to have reversed in more recent EU-commissioned studies (see, for example, The Evaluation Partnership (2007) and the European Court of Auditors (2010)).

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Learning and evidence utilization

While the first two types of literature on policy assessment largely assume a positivist stance, researchers of the third type of literature take a 'post-positive' perspective. This involves a far more chaotic model of policy-making in which many actors pursue multiple goals (e.g. Owens *et al.* 2004, Hertin *et al.* 2009a, 2009b, Turnpenny *et al.* 2009). Researchers taking this perspective offer a very different conception of policy assessment to the traditional textbook concept described above. From their perspective, it is unrealistic to assume that decision-making is rational and that assessment knowledge will necessarily transfer in a linear way directly and smoothly into policy-making. The role of policy assessment, therefore, is not to identify the overall 'best' policy option, but to inform debate and critical reflection in the messy reality of policy-making (Adelle *et al.* 2012).

This third body of literature, therefore, looks for evidence, not of quality of policy assessment, but that assessment has led to policy change via processes of learning (e.g. Nilsson 2006, Hertin *et al.* 2009a, Nykvist and Nilsson 2009, Radaelli 2009). A distinction is often made between single-loop (or instrumental) learning where 'knowledge directly informs concrete decisions by providing specific information on the design of policies' (Hertin *et al.* 2009a, p. 1187), and double-loop (or conceptual) learning where 'knowledge "enlightens" policy makers by slowly feeding new information, ideas and perspectives into the policy system' (Hertin *et al.* 2009a, p. 1187). The former is more aligned with the positivist conception of policy assessment whereas the latter is more closely related to the post-positivistic conceptions. Indeed, much of this literature explicitly endorses more deliberative approaches that encourage conceptual learning (e.g. Owens *et al.* 2004).

Only a few authors have pursued this type of research (e.g. Nilsson 2006, Hertin *et al.* 2009a, Nykvist and Nilsson 2009, Radaelli 2009). They reveal that, while there are some specific examples of policy-making following the linear rational model, this only occurs in certain, rare, situations. More usually, a presumed simplistic relationship between evidence and policy-making leads to a lack of attention to process issues and encourages a bias towards CBA where trade-offs are not sufficiently acknowledged (Hertin *et al.* 2009b). Therefore, the overall evidence pointing towards instrumental learning through policy assessment is scarce (Radaelli 2009). In addition, much of this research finds that while policy assessment could, in principle, provide a new venue for double-loop learning, this seldom happens in practice. Hertin et al. (2009a, p. 1196), for example, found assessment only really informed 'policy designs at the margins' and that the (little) double-loop learning that does take place occurs despite, rather than because of, the design of assessment procedures.

These studies offer few practical recommendations to practitioners on how to improve policy assessment. In contrast, they challenge the whole notion that there are 'simple solutions' to the problem that the 'quality' and effectiveness of assessment should improve.

The politics of assessment

The fourth type of literature investigates the politics of assessment. It also takes a 'post-positivist' stance and asks the question – if policy assessment is not always, or even usually, informing decision-making, what are the other possible underlying motivations for conducting appraisals? Research in this area looks for (and finds) evidence of alternative motivations, such as greater political control over departments, public management reform and symbolic action/emulation (e.g. Radaelli 2010). Studies of the diffusion of policy assessment practices across and within jurisdictions have also revealed how different actors shape assessment structures and practices to suit their preferences (Radaelli 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Research from another angle has focused on the intended and unintended consequences of policy assessment. It treats assessment as 'a good lens on the changing nature of the regulatory state in the EU and its member states' (Radaelli and Meuwese 2009, p. 651).

Policy assessment: retrospect and prospect

In this section we reflect on the state of play for each of our three dimensions of policy assessment (i.e. concept, practices and research) as well as their likely future directions.

The concept of policy assessment

Despite developments in the underlying theoretical assumptions of policy-making, traditional linear rational models of policy-making continue to provide the foundation for most methodological developments in policy assessment (Hertin *et al.* 2009a, 2009b, Bond and Morrison-Saunders 2011). The literature, based on an alternative conceptualization of policy assessment has, however, uncovered many practical difficulties of trying to improve policy assessment practices while they remain heavily informed by these positivist perspectives. It is poignant perhaps to reflect that, while policy assessment, in part, was an attempt to address some of the earlier failings of SEA and EIA, the question of theoretical underpinnings of assessment has not yet been adequately tackled – a point well noted in the SEA literature (e.g. Bina 2007, Wallington *et al.* 2007, Elling 2009). A reticence to move away from the traditional positivist conception of policy assessment by policy-makers as well as many researchers – for example towards more tailor-made and deliberative approaches (Owens *et al.* 2004) – has led to many of the same issues of effectiveness resurfacing.

The practice of policy assessment

The global diffusion of policy assessment witnessed in the last few decades looks set to continue, especially in newcomer and developing countries, championed in part by institutions such as the World Bank. For those, mostly OECD and other industrialized countries, where policy assessment has already become institutionalized (albeit to various extents), refinements to assessment systems look

likely to continue. Several practitioner-led studies have recently indicated that they feel that the quality of assessments in their jurisdiction has improved (e.g. The Evaluation Partnership 2007, National Audit Office 2009, European Court of Auditors 2010). In addition, there are a number of developments in, arguably, the more cutting-edge assessment systems that are attracting interest among practitioners and it is to these that we now turn.

How to further embed policy assessment into the decision-making process is beginning to attract attention in the European Commission, the UK and in some other jurisdictions. First, even where assessment is well institutionalized in early policy formulation phases (usually undertaken by bureaucrats), it is often less well used in the later stages of decision-making (usually undertaken by politicians) (e.g. see European Court of Auditors 2010, paragraph 29). Added to this, significant amendments to policy proposals made during this legislative procedure may not be followed up by additional analysis (European Court of Auditors 2010, paragraph 29). Second, there are calls for (*ex ante*) policy assessment to be better linked to (*ex post*) evaluation of policies (e.g. Jacob *et al.* 2008, European Court of Auditors 2010, paragraph 86, HM Government 2011) as well as earlier policy planning activities (European Court of Auditors 2010, paragraph 84). By further integrating policy assessment into all stages of the policy-making process, it has been suggested that it may evolve into more complex activities of regulatory management (Radaelli and de Francesco 2010). A related issue is how far to involve stakeholders in the policy assessment process. Currently stakeholders are usually at the periphery of policy assessment, only commenting on the policy proposal itself (Radaelli 2004b). However, there is an opportunity, not yet often realized, to adopt a more 'pluralistic' approach to policy assessment and invite stakeholders to comment on a draft of the policy assessment report, and thereby participate in the assessment process in a more deliberate way (Radaelli 2004b). Finally, within the EU there is also the need to vertically link assessment systems between different levels of governance (i.e. between the EU and its member states). The European Commission's Impact Assessment system provides an important platform to strengthen these vertical links (Jacob *et al.* 2008). However, at present only a handful of countries (e.g. the UK) make attempts to do this (HM Government 2011).

Research on policy assessment

As policy assessment practices proliferate the associated academic literature continues to evolve. In a well-cited paper Susan Owens et al. (2004, p. 1954) predicted that practices of, and research on, assessment would continue to evolve in future along parallel tracks in a mutually reinforcing manner. However, Adelle *et al.* (2012) found that the practices and research are informing each other in more complex and subtle ways than predicted. For example, while research on assessment designs and tools continues, policy-makers tend to use relatively few of the complex tools (such as complex computer models) often preferred by researchers (de Ridder *et al.* 2007, Jacob *et al.* 2008, Nilsson *et al.* 2008). This makes it questionable if innovation in either practice or research in this area is tightly linked. In contrast, while practitioners continue to commission yet more research on quality (or otherwise) of policy assessment systems in their jurisdictions (see above), academic interest in this type of literature has stalled; less and less is being produced as academics seem to have realized that a cul-de-sac has been entered (Adelle *et al.* 2012). Although there is still relatively little literature on learning arising from policy assessment (especially on the role of stakeholder evidence), and even less empirical work, academic interest in this type of research is growing relative to research on the performance of policy assessment. However, the interaction between this research and practices appears weak. This is in part because of the lack of a ready audience for this kind of work (which does not seek to inform assessment practices in the same straightforward manner as research on the performance of assessment but starts to question the very purpose of assessment). This is a point taken further in the literature on the politics of assessment, which still represents a relatively new and under-explored area of research and it is yet unclear how, or even if, research will interact with practices.

Conclusions

Policy assessment has become a widely used policy-making procedure but with enormous variation in how it is practised, the way it is researched and the perspectives which underpin it. It is difficult, therefore, to assign 'strengths and weaknesses' or 'opportunities and threats' to policy assessment (as is done in the other papers in this special issue): rather, each of the four different types of literature on policy assessment outlined in this paper presents a different perspective on these. For example, (positivist) researchers interested in the design of assessment might cite the lack of appropriate policy assessment tools (or their poor use) as a weakness of policy assessment. On the other hand, (post-positivist) researchers interested in learning and evidence utilization might see tool (non-)use as somewhat irrelevant due to the lack of the direct transfer of information into policy-making. Instead these researchers could point to the lack of deliberation in policy assessment as the main limitation to its effectiveness. Similarly researchers interested in performance assessment would argue that the gap between stated aims and everyday implementation is a weakness. In contrast, researchers investigating the politics of assessment might find this to be an indication that the underlying motivation of policy assessment, in this instance, is symbolic action or emulation rather than evidence-based policy-making. The issue of threats and opportunities for policy assessment can also be seen through different perspectives. For example, positivist researchers might feel that international institutions such as the World Bank and the OECD present an opportunity to promote the global diffusion of policy assessment. However, post-positivist researchers may see the widespread practice of policy

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assessment, as it currently stands, as neither a good or bad thing: for some it is the fundamental redesign of policy assessment in future that will be important, while for others policy assessment presents a policy instrument to be studied whatever the extent of its practice or its quality.

Partly as a consequence of this diversity in perspectives on policy assessment, it is perhaps not surprising that expectations about what policy assessment can deliver have also proliferated. At times these expectations can appear unrealistic: policy assessment on its own cannot, for example, halt regulatory growth or fundamentally alter power balances between policy sectors or actors. Nor, for that matter, can it necessarily correct the shortcomings of assessment at the project and programme level or single-handedly deliver more coordinated and sustainable policies. Researchers from the third type of literature on learning and evidence utilization would argue that this is especially the case when the concept and practices (and in many cases the research) of policy assessment continues to be based on a linear rational model of policy-making.

What then does this mean for the future of policy assessment as a whole (i.e. combining concept, practices and research)? Efforts which seek to mediate between the positivist and the post-positivist approaches could play a significant role here. Policy assessment researchers are well placed to shape new developments. Susan Owens *et al.* (2004) cautioned us not to create a false dichotomy between these two theoretical approaches which they saw as complementary. Adelle *et al.* (2012) argue that a future research agenda could – and indeed should – encourage interaction between research on policy assessment that straddles linear rational and post-positivist approaches. This agenda would create connections between research *for* policy-making (e.g. research on methods and tools for assessment and on the performance of assessment) and research *on* policy-making (e.g. on learning and politics of assessment). Such interaction could help realign the practices of and research on policy assessment into a state of contested and possibly more mutually beneficial interaction. In these circumstances it is feasible that policy assessment could at last become an arena through which some of the ongoing issues of effectiveness of assessment, whether at the project, programme or policy level, could finally be worked through.

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Notes

1. For more information on the IQ-Tools project see: http://www.zew.de/en/forschung/projekte.php3?action=detail&nr = 37, last accessed 25 March 2011.
2. For more information on the Sustainability A-Test project see: http://www.sustainabilitya-test.net/, last accessed 25 March 2011.
3. For more information on the MATISSE project see: http://www.matisse-project.net/projectcomm/, last accessed 25 March 2011.
4. For more information on the EVIA project see: http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/ffu/evia/, last accessed 25 March 2011.
5. For more information on the LIAISE Network of Excellence see: http://www.liaise-noe.eu/, last accessed 2 September 2011.

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