

The Unequal Burden of Administrative Complexity

Administrative Absorptive Capacity and why the same process does not impose the same burden on everyone

Independent, non-governmental research initiative.

Abstract

The same administrative requirement can impose very different burdens on different people, and on the same person at different times. This paper proposes Administrative Absorptive Capacity as a way of describing the practical capacity available to a person at a particular time to absorb, organise and respond to administrative demands without disproportionate difficulty.

Administrative Absorptive Capacity

Administrative Absorptive Capacity (AAC) is the practical capacity available to a person at a particular time to absorb, organise and respond to administrative demands without disproportionate difficulty. It is proposed here as an IOAS working concept rather than an established measure.

Literacy and capacity are different questions

Administrative literacy asks whether I know how to navigate the system. Administrative Absorptive Capacity asks whether, in my circumstances today, I have the capacity to do it. A person may understand administration extremely well and still have little available capacity during bereavement, illness, caring pressure, financial crisis or a period of multiple simultaneous demands.

Capacity belongs partly to the person - and partly to the moment

AAC may reflect knowledge, cognitive capacity, time, digital capability, practical resources, money, mobility, language, confidence, social support, emotional bandwidth, current circumstances and the number of administrative demands already competing for attention.

Administration does not arrive into an empty life

Administrative processes often cluster around difficult life events: illness, disability, unemployment, bereavement, separation, housing difficulty, caring responsibilities or financial pressure. The moment at which the state requires the most organisation from a person may therefore be the moment at which that person's available capacity is lowest.

The invisible helper

A process that appears manageable may be manageable because somebody else is helping: a relative, friend, adviser, advocate or professional. A useful measure is therefore the Assistance Dependency Rate: the proportion of successful users who require substantive help from another person to complete the process.

Administrative abandonment

A further proposed concept is Administrative Abandonment: where a person intending to pursue an administrative process ceases principally because the practical burden exceeds the capacity they are willing or able to devote to it. Non-completion should not automatically be interpreted as lack of need or lack of entitlement.

Digital-by-default

Digital services can substantially reduce burden, but they can also concentrate several tasks into the citizen: identity verification, document capture, file conversion, password management, portal navigation and interpretation of automated messages. Digitalisation should therefore be assessed by total effort, not simply by the disappearance of paper.

A proposed principle

The burden of an administrative requirement should be judged not only by what it asks, but by what a reasonable range of citizens must expend in order to comply with it.

Conclusion

AAC should not yet be turned into a premature score. The concept should first earn its measurement by helping researchers describe real journeys more accurately. Simplification can then be understood in two complementary ways: reduce unnecessary administrative demand, and increase the support available where necessary demand cannot reasonably be removed.

Irish Office for Administrative Simplification

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This paper is intended to clarify problems and develop questions for further research rather than prescribe institutional arrangements.