

Australia and New Zealand: Australasian Evaluation Society (AES)
Three Decades of Strengthening Evaluation Capacity in Australasia (1982-2012)

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BACKGROUND

Introduction to the Australasian Evaluation Society

The Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) was established to inspire evaluation practitioners with a firm foundation for continuous improvement in evaluation theory and practice across Australasia. The Society officially commenced in 1987 and now has twenty-five years of experience in supporting its membership. The AES is now the primary Australasian professional organisation for evaluation practitioners, managers, teachers and students of evaluation, and other interested individuals.

The driving force of the AES is to improve the theory, practice and use of evaluation through:

1. establishing and promoting ethics and standards in evaluation practice as a service to the community of evaluators and users of evaluations;
2. encouraging advances in the theory and practice of evaluation by publishing such advances and by recognising outstanding contributions;
3. providing education and training in matters related to evaluation;
4. providing forums for networking and the discussion of ideas including society publications, seminars, workshops and conferences;
5. acting as an advocate for evaluation and encouraging understanding about the use and application of evaluation;
6. linking members who have similar evaluation interests; and
7. other activities consistent with this aim.

The AES started with a membership of 140 and currently has over 1000 members involved in all aspects of evaluation. Members meet regularly through Regional Groups centred in major cities in Australia and New Zealand.

History of the AES

The AES started through the process of a series of National Evaluation Conferences in Australia. The initial conferences were heavily supported by both academic and government evaluation professionals. The conferences provided a venue for evaluation practitioners to meet and exchange views. Over the years, leaders in the sector made contact and recognised the need for practitioners to share views and assist in developing the evaluation skills and professional recognition. The AES has evolved from a small networking group, informally sharing knowledge and experience into a formal organisation with a national and regional profile, technical credibility, providing professional services to members. The following paragraphs provide a brief profile of the key people who influenced the development process of the AES and the steps that have been taken to bring AES to its current level of organisation.

Founding members and Fellows

The AES emerged from the work of the current AES Fellows and other eminent evaluation practitioners. Dr Elaine Martin, of Flinders University, School of Social Administration and Social Work, is acknowledged as a founding influence through her leadership in evaluation theory and practice in social welfare. The founding fellows were recognised in 2003 and include:

- Anona Armstrong, PhD, Grad Dip Pub Pol, BA (HONS), Founding AES President in 1986, Company Directors Diploma, Professor of Governance, Victoria Law School (Victoria) and Member of the Order of Australia in 2008.

- John Owen, BSc (Hons), MEd, PhD, Associate Professor, Centre for Program Evaluation, University of Melbourne.
- Sue Funnell, BA, MA. AES Awards Chair 1993-1997. A key contributor to use of program logic approaches and providing policy support to the NSW Government.
- Chris Milne, BA (Hons), DipEd, MA, (NSW), AES Inaugural Chair of Ethics Committee.
- Colin Sharp, Associate Professor of Management, Flinders Institute of Public Policy and Management, Flinders University
- Ian Trotman, New Zealand AES representative, substantial contribution to AES constitution and Ethics and Standards Committee.

In later years, the work of additional Fellows has been recognised as they have assisted AES in its development. The AES Fellows retain an active role in promoting the AES and advocating on its behalf. The high achievements of the Fellows allow them to act as mentors to other members and guidance to the AES on matters related to the field of evaluation.

Evolution of the AES Structure and Operations

1982-1992: The initial AES structure was an Executive Committee comprising three office bearers and a general membership. From the early 90's membership grew and there was wider involvement in AES activities. In 1992, a Strategic Working Party on the future of the AES prepared a corporate plan "AES 2000: Leading the Society into the Future." During the planning process, options for future directions were discussed, including being a broad interest group, a learned society or a chartered professional institution. The Committee decided that AES would provide most benefit to its members and the sector by being a learned society.

1992-2002: The AES 2000 plan positioned AES as a broker between "doers" and "supporters" of evaluation and the objectives as described in above were formulated. The corporate plan was used to develop a new constitution and it was proposed that AES finances should cover appointment of part time staff to improve services. In 1993, the Committee decided to reconstitute under the Australian Capital Territory Association Incorporated Act that would provide a better legal framework and limited liability than the previous Club registration.

The structure of the Board was adjusted to provide greater membership and skills representation. Key structures included: a Board of four office bearers, regional representatives and 5 elected general members with a balance of skills. The Board was required to have a minimum of three meetings per year. By 1995, the Board was again considering the future of AES and a Strategic Planning Committee was established. The Strategic Plan: "AES Leading Evaluation Theory, Practice and Use into the 21st Century."

The Strategic Plan influenced the next stage of AES development as more members joined and the breadth of activities increased. In 1994, the new Constitution set up a more manageable federation of regions with a head office support. A centralised financing model was established but with capability for regions to prepare business cases for non-routine projects. A few regions were partially funded through other organisations or by sponsors. The Constitution also ensured equitable regional representation on the Executive Committee and the Board.

By 1999, an increase in the number of regions and greater complexity of AES business increased the scope and responsibilities of the Board. This resulted in longer meetings and higher costs. Consequently, the structure was modified to a larger Executive Committee to handle day to day management. The Committee reported to the Board three times per year to enable the Board to set strategy, monitor progress and generate the required material for the Annual Report and Annual General Meeting.

2002-2012: The operation of the Board is governed by the AES Constitution that was

adopted in September 2009. The AES Constitution outlines the basic operational policies and guidelines for AES, particularly in relation to membership and good governance. This was followed by development of an AES Ten Year Strategy 2010-2020 and an Operational Plan for 2011-2013. The new Strategic Plan articulated the AES vision and mission as:

Vision: "To be the pre-eminent voice and leader of evaluation in Australasia"

Mission: "To see rigorous evaluation as central to policy development, program design and service delivery."

The AES Strategy and Operational Plan are now overseen by an eight member Board and a suite of operational Committees and specific Working Groups. The Committees and Working Groups encompass:

- Membership Services and Governance
- Conference Organising
- Finance and Audit
- Ethical and Professional Practice
- Indigenous Strategy
- Professional Learning
- Strategic Engagement
- Marketing
- Evaluation Journal
- Awards and Recognition

Each Committee and Working Group operates according to the *AES Committees and Working Groups Terms of Reference* (draft) 2012. This approach is designed to increase the membership engagement within AES, harness the skills of leaders within AES and provide a cost-effective model of operation.

Regional Activity

Regional activity is the heart of the AES. The regional activities are the focus of personal contacts and mutual support. Activities range from delivery of a program of seminars and discussion forums to semi-social meetings associated with lunch or dinner. In the early years there was no formal provision for regions. The eastern Australian regions were most active but were quickly followed by New Zealand, South and West Australia. Activity has fluctuated in Tasmania and recently has grown in the Northern Territory. New Zealand grew from one region to three; then with government restructuring reverted to two groups. The AES now comprises ten local and regional branches: two in New Zealand and eight in Australia:

New Zealand	Australia	
Auckland	Victoria	New South Wales
Wellington	Queensland	Northern Territory
	Western Australia	South Australia
	Canberra	Tasmania

Operation of the regional branches and the local program of activities are dependent upon local leadership and volunteers. To date the regions have rotated the intensive task of organising and supporting the AES annual conference.

Annual International Conferences

The Annual Conference has been, and continues to be, a flagship activity of the AES. The first was conducted in Melbourne during 1982; five years before the AES was formally established. The first Conference attracted 90 evaluation practitioners. Anona Armstrong was Organising Committee Chair and her influence contributed to establishment of the AES, with her taking the role of the first Chair of AES.

The networks formed through the first two conferences cemented professional links between leading professionals in Australia and New Zealand. In 1986, the Conference

moved inter-state and was held in Sydney. Since that time, the Conference has rotated through the regions and numbers attending have increased to an average of around 350-400 participants. The Annual Conferences are now a proven forum for learning and networking. The AGM and Board meetings have generally coincided with the Conference. The AES Professional Awards presentations are now also incorporated into the Conference proceedings at the Conference dinner, supporting excellence in evaluation practice.

Evaluation Journal of Australasia

Prior to establishment of the AES, in the period from 1977-84, an evaluation newsletter was edited by Jerome Winston. Soon after establishment of the AES, plans for an AES newsletter were discussed as a means to showcase AES, its professionalism and membership. The Bulletin of the AES was launched in 1987 under Barry Bannister. This evolved to the Evaluation Journal of Australasia (EJA) with major components of: refereed articles, reflections on practice and book reviews. It was seen as a vehicle for academics and experienced evaluators to communicate information. Two issues were produced annually.

In the early 90s a series of "How to" booklets was proposed with thoughts of a wider market but they did not eventuate due to lack of resources. In 1992, Darrel Caulley launched the Evaluation News & Comments (EN&C) to meet the needs of members particularly outside state capitals. Originally three issues per year were intended. Financial constraints reduced publication to two issues per year alternating with the EJA. The number of pages sometimes fluctuated with available funds.

In the mid-90s the EJA faltered mainly due to insufficient resources and to insufficiently polished contributions. Several issues were cancelled rather than release material that was not to a sufficient standard. However, by 2000, the Journal and magazine were merged into a new EJA and more recently, the online E-news.

Maintaining the momentum of current publication commitments through regular production of EJA and E-News is now a priority of the AES. Articles continue to be submitted across an increasing range of topic areas related to evaluation, and submission of manuscripts from overseas authors is growing. Members are encouraged to submit manuscripts to the journal as this is considered a vital source of professional peer review and knowledge dissemination about current issues and approaches to evaluation.

STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Strengthening an Enabling Environment

AES is contributing to improving evaluation standards, professional knowledge and experience across Australia and New Zealand. The generation of the AES *Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations (1997)* was an important milestone for AES. The Guidelines were generated through consultation with the regional groups and a summarised *Code of Ethics* was endorsed by the Board in December 2000. New members receive a copy as they join and are required to sign their acceptance to abide by the Code. This initiative is instrumental in improving the standards of Evaluation and strengthening the credibility of AES members. It has also been marketed throughout the region and internationally with other Evaluation Societies to assist in their development of similar standards.

In addition, AES supports evaluation in the public sector through the work of its membership:

- 38% of AES members work for the public sector in either Australia or New Zealand
- 36% work in consultancy and the majority are regularly engaged with government assignments.
- 12% work in the not-for-profit sector and are regularly required to report to government on the outcomes of government funded projects.
- Many of 12% of the AES membership in academia are directly engaged in research and evaluation projects focused on government policy and programs.

The role of AES members who have worked in the public sector has been important in strengthening the enabling environment. There have been prominent AES members such as Marion Amies (AES Awards Chair 1997-1999) and Keith McKay who promoted evaluation practice within the Department of Finance, Brian English in the Office of the Premier and Cabinet in Western Australia and Darren Harris who prepared evaluation policy/guidelines for the Department of Human Services in Victoria. Integrating evaluation processes and procedures within government has promoted the value of evaluation in improving program quality and increased the program standards for government and not for profit service providers.

The AES conference where evaluation policy issues and opportunities are presented and discussed is well-attended by government representatives and this provides a forum for networking between the government attendees and other evaluation practitioners. In New Zealand, there has been a particular focus on good evaluation practice in relation to cross cultural issues and this is strengthening the application of such practice in a range of public programs.

In recent years, the AES has increasingly turned its focus towards policy advocacy. One example is the AES's recent submission to the Australian Government Department of Finance and Deregulation's draft Commonwealth Financial Accountability Review (CFAR) 2010. The objective of CFAR is to improve performance, accountability and risk management across government. The AES submission highlighted the work of the AES and its role in strengthening accountability for public investments. The AES' Strategic Engagement Committee will work to further advance evaluation in the external environment in both domestic and international development spheres.

The AES supports an active workshop and professional development program. It has attracted sector experts to Australasia, such as Terry Smutylo to provide training on Outcome Mapping in late 2011. The AES has formed an effective partnership with the Centre for Program Evaluation (CPE) at the University of Melbourne where the AES office is based. Further opportunities for collaboration between the AES and the CPE will be forged over forthcoming years.

The AES is also providing capacity building support to the emerging Papua New Guinea (PNG) Association of Professional Evaluators (AoPE). Further across Australasia and in the global forum for improving evaluation practise, AES provides support via individual members to the International Organisation for Cooperation in Evaluation (IOCE), Network of Networks for Impact Evaluation (NONIE), International Program for Development Evaluation Training (IPDET), and the Shanghai International Program for Development Evaluation Training (SHIPDET). The resources and expertise available through AES and its activities provide a base, tools and a professional support network that underpins region-wide activity in evaluation.

Enhancing Individual Capacities

AES emerged from a strong demand across Australasia to strengthening evaluation capacity amongst practitioners. AES has gradually developed clear strategies and mechanisms to support evaluation capacity development for a range of practitioners. The main avenues for capacity development are the AES annual conference and the professional development program. The conference generally has a pre-program of workshops covering a wide range of topics. These are well attended and evaluations indicate a high level of appreciation of the professional and skill development opportunities. The EJA also provides opportunities for both members and non-members to extend their knowledge of different aspects, application and innovations in evaluation.

Over time, AES has been able to strengthen its support by offering opportunities for visiting trainers to travel around the regions, conducting seminars and workshops. In the late 1990s, the AES Awards were introduced. These were designed to encourage and recognize excellence in evaluation and provide role models for the sector. The role of the awards has increased over the years in line with scope and profile of the sector. The

conference, awards and seminars have also been a means to strengthen relationships with individuals in emerging evaluation societies across Australasia.

Strengthening equity-focussed evaluation systems and evaluations

AES has instituted Special Interest Groups (SIG's) as a vehicle through which to progress particular areas of interest and manage the development of the knowledge and practice in these areas. The AES currently has four operational SIG's: the Indigenous Evaluation SIG, the Realist Evaluation and Realist Synthesis SIG, the Performance Measurement SIG and the Eval Tech SIG. The AES aims to encourage and support the establishment of more SIGs.

The development of Indigenous evaluation is a priority for the AES. An AES Indigenous strategy supports the aims of: increasing the numbers of Indigenous people in evaluation; strengthening the capacity of evaluators to produce high quality, ethical work in Indigenous contexts; and, increasing knowledge, skills and competence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous evaluators.

Key initiatives in this area include:

- support grants for Indigenous evaluators to participate in the annual conference and workshops program;
- developing a registry of Indigenous researchers and exploring mentoring/training pathways and promoting partnerships between the AES and Indigenous organisations, people, groups and people;
- Regional groups have conducted a range of seminars and workshops focussed on Indigenous programs and on conducting responsive evaluation in Indigenous contexts. Nan Wehipeihana and Kate McKegg conducted workshops across Australia on developmental evaluation, which drew heavily on their experiences with Maori community development programs.

BOTTLENECKS/CHALLENGES

Over three decades of operation AES has faced a range of different challenges. The three challenges that have posed the greatest difficulty in building AES's capacity have been:

Building financial momentum and governance capacity

Initially, the AES worked largely on the contribution of volunteers and with government support. In the mid-1990s, government support reduced and AES turned to private sector conference organizers. There has been tension over the years in how AES should position the conference, with some favouring lower fees and more modest arrangements and others preferring a more professional profile and a bigger profit margin for the event entailing higher fees. The conferences have been run on a for-profit basis, but not all conferences have operated at a profit due to different reasons. AES has had to learn from experience in designing and managing the conference to ensure that an appropriate margin is generated.

Similar discussions have been generated over setting of membership fees. AES has had to consider setting fees that provide value for the members whilst allowing the organisation to remain viable. The AES has not always been able to afford dedicated administration staff. This has hindered the ability of AES to operate as effectively as the leadership and membership wished. Although the contribution of volunteers has been invaluable, the fragmented nature of governance resulted in difficulties in maintaining operations. As the membership has grown, and fees have kept pace with the market and demand of members, the organisation is now in a better position to cover the costs for management and administration. The AES appointed its first Executive Officer (EO) in mid-2011 which has raised the capacity of the AES to deliver on its Strategic Plan.

The intention is that both the AES annual conference and the workshop program, together with annual membership fees, provide an adequate basis to support the range of services the AES intends to provide in alignment with its Strategic Plan. This will

require effective business planning and monitoring income generated against expenditure. The intended goal is to reach a balanced budget where the AES can support its strategic directions and a staffed office. This has brought a new level of organisation and efficiency that will assist AES growth in future.

The disperse geographical spread of operations

The AES currently spreads over two main countries with eight regions in Australia and two in New Zealand. Establishing effective modes of communication and operation across this wide geographical spread has been a challenge. There has been difficulty in establishing an effective means of instilling sound practices in each region, whilst allowing sufficient autonomy and flexibility to suit the differing needs of each region.

Over the years, a model has emerged that supports regions to develop their own program of activities through an annual planning process. However, accountability is required in line with the overall AES strategic directions, operational plan and budget process. The AES consistently reviews its own progress and procedures and is gradually improving its capability to address the needs of its membership across all (and future) locations. The newly developed governance structure of the AES that marks out roles and responsibilities of the Board, the Executive Officer, the newly formed Committees of the Board and the regions should assist the process of improving communication.

Building an online presence

AES identified in 1996 that it should have an online presence. Initially a website was hosted by the supplier of AES administration services at no cost. Over time, as a more complex site was envisaged, AES needed to take a forward-looking approach that would minimize costs and ensure that AES generates the required revenue for its operations. This has required AES to invest time and resources in ensuring sound policies for use of technology, rights for sale of sponsorship, editorial control, and structure a site to allow for future development. The AES has recently updated its website (www.aes.asn.au) to keep its profile and activities relevant and in line with technological advances. The new website will provide an interface between the AES its membership and the broader sector, as well as streamline operations.

PROGRESS AND RESULTS

The AES has achieved steady growth and progress over its 25 years of operation. The progress is demonstrated by its increasing membership and influence. There are six clear indicators that demonstrate that AES is achieving progress in line with its Constitution. These are:

	Objective	Results
1.	Establishing and promoting ethics and standards in evaluation practice	Publication of AES Code of Ethics and Guidelines Regular review to update Code of Ethics
2.	Encouraging advances in the theory and practice of evaluation by publishing such advances and by recognising outstanding contributions	Regular publishing of Journal since 1990s Annual Awards for Excellence in Evaluation in a range of categories
3.	Providing education and training in matters related to evaluation	Annual program of workshops and seminars in each region and at the Annual Conference
4.	Providing forums for networking and the discussion of ideas including society publications, seminars, workshops and conferences	Supporting regions in local activities and program of events which generally take place on a monthly basis Increasing opportunities for networking at Conference.
5.	Acting as an advocate for evaluation and encouraging understanding about the use and application of	Advocacy activities undertaken with Commonwealth and State/Territory Government departments, the non-for-profit sector and the Higher Education Sector

	Objective	Results
	evaluation	
6.	Linking members who have similar evaluation interests	Increase in membership from 140 to over 1,000. Online register of evaluation consultants, evaluation annual awards to increase profile of members Establishment of committee structure to involve a wider group of AES members in strategic areas

KEY ENABLING FACTORS

There are three main factors that have consistently contributed to the AES capability to deliver results. These are: (i) vision, leadership and involvement; (ii) recognition of professional expectation (a market-led approach) and building critical mass; and (iii) sound governance principles and practice.

Vision and Leadership

The AES would not exist nor have accomplished its achievements without the vision of a number of dedicated leaders. In particular, the AES Fellows, successive Board members and committee and regional chairs have demonstrated the ability to embrace a collective vision, providing their own vision for different aspects of the organisation. The AES leaders have been able to communicate their vision so that other members have been able to embrace it and together strive to implement it. AES members offer many hours of their time to undertake the work of the AES. From executive duties on the Board, to regions organizing and seminars and networking events, to the production of the Journal and organization of the annual conference; the high level of volunteerism is critical to the success of AES. The development of a Strategic Plan for a 10 year period 2010-2020 has provided a vision to the future. The current EO, the Board, the Committees and Regions are working toward its implementation.

Recognition of professional expectations

AES has made a strenuous effort to listen to its membership and potential membership - both from those having a professional interest and from the public. The membership expects a regular Journal with relevant articles of a high professional standard that have been subject to peer review. Members are also attracted by regular and relevant opportunities for professional development and skills maintenance. The public expectation of AES is that its membership displays a school of professionals that keep up to date with sector advances and that operate to a code of ethics. The profile of AES is increasingly important for people seeking knowledge and advice related to evaluation practice. The online medium is enhancing the reach of AES across Australasia.

Building critical mass has been important to provide the range of skills, experience & personal attributes along with the necessary wherewithal to make things happen. It has also been important in building the financial base of AES to the point where the survival of the association is assured, providing a professional and credible profile consistent with the sphere of other professional associations. The critical mass is now strengthening AES's influence in advocacy and more widespread promotion of the value of evaluation in accordance with AES standards.

Sound governance principles and practice

In order for AES to function effectively and deliver services such as those described in the previous sections, the AES dynamics have needed to balance: good representation with efficiency; innovation with solid experience; with the needs of individuals, the regions, consultancy firms, the public and the collective professional interest. For efficiency, AES has had to establish adequate records and clearly recorded policies that ensure consistency over time and location. Good systems facilitate quick responses, reduce the need to reinvent the wheel and enhance accountability. Integral to good service delivery is effective multi-directional communication. There are different levels and types of communication required

within the organisation, through the Board, committees and working groups; around the regions, with the membership and the public. When difficulties arise, good communication is essential to finding rapid solutions.

INNOVATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The AES has continuously built on lessons learned from its own operation and membership, as well as by maintaining relevance in the global context of evaluation practice. The AES has evolved through a series of phases: from the excitement of establishment, through the challenges of building a regional body; from being an informal interest group to a professional business-driven organization - each phase building from the previous phase. Nevertheless, there are three main lessons that stand out in the growth of the AES, particularly:

- i. Building credibility with members and the wider community is an important step in the process of establishing a VOPE. This takes time and is dependent on the quality and consistency of some cornerstone recurrent deliverables such as the Conference, the workshop program, a professional journal and good mechanisms for member communication and interaction.
- ii. Governance processes are important and take time to develop in building a strong basis for the operation of a professional society. Each step of installing governance processes takes time and effort on the part of the leadership and membership to ensure that the processes are relevant and efficient. As the organisation changes, there is a need to regularly review and update procedures so that they continually support the existing membership and encourage growth.
- iii. The AES has had to gradually develop a business model that balances income generation with professional interests and sector developments. This has required that the operations of the Society grow and develop through its strategic planning process and in line with member expectations. It has been necessary to achieve the right balance between income generation and expenditure; service delivery and capability that have been critical to AES's sustainability and success.

NEXT STEPS

The AES is currently embarking on strategies that build on its core areas of activity in the following ways. The strategies are articulated in the AES Strategic and Implementation Plan and are being actioned through the Committees, Working Groups and Regional Groups. These include:

- Develop communication products aimed at advocacy on behalf of the sector and field of evaluation and influencing policy around and use of evaluation;
- Develop a stakeholder engagement strategy involving both Australasian governments and Non-Government organisations and the International development sector;
- Review and re-publish the AES Code of Ethics, with a view to enhancing promotion of ethical guidelines around work with Indigenous communities and peoples;
- Design and deliver a viable, annual professional learning program;
- Continue to deliver a successful Annual Conference;
- Continue to develop and enhance the status of the Evaluation Journal of Australasia;
- Stabilise operations, systems and income streams;
- Develop on-line capacity for member communication and interaction;
- Strengthen governance processes between the Board, EO, Committees and Regions.

AES is also cognizant of its own growth and development. It has embedded a culture of evaluation within its own operations. For instance, each Conference is routinely evaluated regarding levels of satisfaction and the professional impact of the Conference on attendees. These evaluations allow for trend analysis on on-going learning. The AES is about to

undertake a member survey to gain a better understanding of member needs. With an approach of continuous improvement, AES expects to continue to grow and provide influence and value to the evaluation sector across and beyond Australasia.