

AES standards

Workshop on AES standards development

held on 11 October 2001

Kerry Rose

Kerry Rose is Director, Natural Heritage Trust Monitoring and Evaluation, with Environment Australia.

A workshop was held at the AES annual conference to address a number of issues including:

- whether to develop an Australasian set of standards or adopt the US Joint Committee set;
- identification of issues specific to Australia and NZ which might support the need for a specific set of standards;
- how to progress the discussion of standards within the AES, now that it has adopted an ethical framework which supports their adoption; and
- how the need for standards might interact with other strategic issues raised at the conference, including capacity building.

The workshop ran for two hours and attracted around 20 participants.

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2001-2002

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Risks to be addressed

The workshop began by seeking participants' views, based on their own professional experience, of the kinds of risk which standards could effectively address. The risks that were identified fell into the categories of management, evaluators, stakeholders, budget, evaluation scope, data collection, and reporting.

Reasons for standards

The group identified rigour, confidence, education and understanding, and conflict resolution as core needs for a set of standards:

- **rigour** – would provide standing for evaluation as a profession, specify and facilitate good evaluation practice, enable expectations to be clearly articulated and agreed, provide external authority for quality assurance, apply across disciplinary boundaries.
- **confidence** – would increase credibility with clients, public confidence in evaluation, likelihood that findings will be used.
- **education and understanding** – useful as reference point for understanding what evaluation means, education of community, education of students, on-the-job training of new evaluators.
- **conflict resolution.**

Kinds of risks

- Management risks:**
- Client refusal to accept recommendations even after accepting the process
 - Multiple changes to management/government
 - Management changing its mind about what is required
 - Culture of blame
 - Confusion with personal performance assessment
 - Inadequate understanding of what evaluation is
 - Fear of evaluation
- Evaluator risks:**
- Inadequate knowledge of how to evaluate, what evaluation is, what purposes it serves
 - Need for a 'no surprises' approach (cf. audit)
 - Evaluator bias (too much engagement)
 - Lack of evaluator understanding of organisational culture, culture of program clients
 - No standard learning path/apprenticeship
- Stakeholder risks:**
- Evaluation process captured by particular stakeholders
 - 'Professional' stakeholders
 - Unresponsiveness to stakeholders
 - Neglected stakeholder complaints
- Budget risks:**
- Under-resourcing
 - Budget blowouts
 - Budget constraints on methodology
 - Impact of limited budget on quality of data and confidence in the report
 - Not managing client expectations early enough to meet \$ constraints
- Scoping risks:**
- Evaluation does not address/answer the terms of reference
 - Terms of reference do not address issues, but are treated as absolute
 - Hidden agendas
 - Outcome determined in advance
 - Methodology inadequate to (or too ambitious for) scope of the evaluation
 - Taking on more than you can handle
- Data collection risks:**
- Misplaced expectation that community organisations can provide necessary data
 - Lost documentation for summative evaluation
 - Data-free (or even outcome-free) programs
 - Dishonest/unwilling subjects
- Reporting risks:**
- Temptation to talk up positives and play down negatives
 - Nobody takes notice of findings (choose to ignore, don't have power to implement, don't understand them)
 - No structured follow-up
 - Unrealistic recommendations (not politically feasible)
 - Misleading reports are a risk to the credibility of the profession

kinds of risks

Potential disadvantages of standards

Concerns were expressed about the structure, processes for the development of and consequences of standards:

- possibility of conflict between AES standards and other professional standards by which individual evaluators are bound;
- difficult to reach a universally applicable definition of what constitutes an acceptable objective for an evaluation;
- too difficult to reach consensus on minimum acceptable practices;
- standards could be set too high;
- could constrict practice, depending on how prescriptive the standards are;
- potential to trigger disciplinary action;
- could increase risk of litigation or legalistic compliance focus.

Implementation issues

The workshop went on to discuss how the AES might go about implementing a set of standards, and raised significant issues about their role and the models underlying any set that might be chosen:

- **roles** – should they be used in an educative role, as advisory standards to lead towards good practice, or as a form of quality assurance, e.g. certification that a report meets the AES standard?
- **models** – should the standards be set at the level of broad principle, providing a generic framework to supplement, or be supplemented

by, existing standards specific to other professions? Or should they form a set of minimum acceptable standards, developed over time through general principles to detailed practice guidelines?

Where to from here?

The discussion at the conference workshop can in no way be seen as being complete. This analysis of the issues can be challenged on a number of fronts, and the list of categories and issues is not exhaustive. While the workshop attracted a wide cross-section of interests and experience across the Society, it cannot be seen as any more than indicative of the issues to be addressed. Establishing a need for standards for the Australasian region, let alone developing them, requires a much more considered debate than was possible in such a short session.

The workshop reached no resolution on whether to adopt the Joint Committee Standards or carry on with the development of a specific set of Australasian standards, nor on how the discussion could best be moved forward. However, one clear benefit to come from the exercise was an injection of new blood to the Standards Committee, which has so far had little chance to make progress because of the work commitments of the original four members. The new eight-member committee hopes to be able to organise a face-to-face meeting early in the New Year and develop more extensive proposals and discussion materials for members in the period leading up to the 2002 conference. Please contact a member of the committee if you are interested in helping out, or simply want to tell us your views on any of these issues.

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