

# Reflections on a decade in the life of the Australasian Evaluation Society: 1990–1999

## a decade of AES

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The 2003 AES Conference<sup>1</sup> was the 21st birthday of conferences held by a group of evaluators who after a few such efforts organised themselves more formally in 1996 to become the AES, which was officially registered in Victoria in 1987. Ours was the third such regional professional society of evaluators, after the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) started in 1981 and the American Evaluation Association (AEA) formed in 1986, as the consolidation of two earlier evaluation associations: the Evaluation Network and the Evaluation Research Society.

This article is not a history of the AES. It lacks the academic rigour and research. It particularly overlooks much of the activity of the regions which are really the heart of the Society. It reflects my experiences, my perceptions, and my analysis over the ten years when I was most actively involved in the Society. Despite these deficiencies or potential biases, I hope it provides an insight into what goes into making a professional society as effective and highly regarded as the AES is, despite having had its share of trials along the way.

### The early 90s

My first contact with the AES came when I attended the 1990 National Evaluation Conference in Sydney and was impressed by the very efficient organisation and content. A vigorous debate took place on whether the AES should foster training for evaluation or itself undertake evaluation training. A strong consensus focused on internal evaluation, as it was felt that external evaluation led to reports gathering dust with little change, whereas internal evaluation usually had some vested interest in implementation. This session concluded that the AES should collect and supply

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information on tuition courses, experts, resource kits and case studies.

With 350–400 attendees, the conference was well over double the size of its predecessors and set new expectations for the future. As one of the few New Zealanders present, and perhaps from opening my mouth too much, I was pressed by the incoming President Darrel Caulley to join the AES (General or Management) Committee. Not long after the Conference I was persuaded to join the Ethics and Standards Subcommittee to provide a NZ perspective. The Society's considerable activities in ethics and standards form the subject of a separate article which follows.

At that time there was a very active Queensland region which published regular comprehensive newsletters, had established a video library of case study presentations, and was proposing to encourage student members by offering an essay prize across all Queensland universities. Victoria also had a newsletter, but it was less frequent and more oriented to local meetings. WA had a Program Evaluation Network which met every six weeks with 60–120 (usually the upper end) attendees, although there were only fifteen members of AES in the State. During this period the Canberra Evaluation Forum was being formed by public sector evaluators.

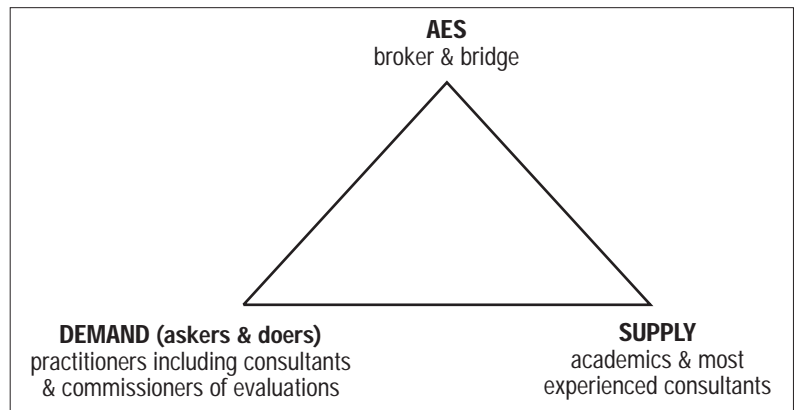
A significant profit from the Sydney conference enabled the President to offer financial assistance to regions to help organise their activities. John Owen was appointed to the new position of Training Coordinator and conducted a survey of regional contacts, which led to the formation of a Training Network and a clearing house.

Darrel Caulley also took responsibility for initiating new developments including establishing an Awards Subcommittee, setting up a Conference Planning Subcommittee, personally putting the membership list on to computer, and producing the first promotional statement of AES Aims and Objectives.

The Adelaide conference in 1991 was fully booked out with 355 participants. The major topic was the future of the AES, which appeared to have reached a crossroads. Up to then it had been primarily a loose network pulled together to arrange an annual conference. The last two of these had become much larger and more sophisticated. Pressures were arising for AES to become more involved in training by oversight of standards for providers, or by direct involvement in delivery. There were indications that if ethics and standards were not addressed by the profession, evaluation was now gaining such political prominence across Australia that government(s) could become involved. There was also debate on whether to encourage members to use letters (MAES) after their names and to provide additional grades of membership like Fellows. This in turn raised issues of accreditation.

At this time there was no formal constitutional provision for regional branches or chapters. This had been done deliberately to allow maximum flexibility. Now the regions believed a formal arrangement was needed, particularly in relation to training activities and to financial needs and management. There were indications some would go their own way. An interim formula was adopted that regions concentrate on providing information to members but make places available for others, using terms such as 'the encouragement of debate', 'sponsored by the Society' but *not* 'promoted by' or 'under the auspices of the AES'. There was discussion on what services could help more remote members, and the idea of a newsletter was floated.

After long debate it was decided to set up a Strategic Planning Working Party to look at the future of the AES. The Working Party made great progress over a solid weekend workshop and produced its report prepared by Hans Wijgh in the form, then in vogue, of a corporate plan, *AES 2000 – Leading the Society into the Future*. It enunciated, for the first time, the role of the AES in a triangular relationship between *doers of evaluation* (the demand side) and *supporters of evaluation* (the supply side) where it could fulfil the role of *bridge and broker*. It also identified a role for the Society in *representing the profession* and providing *information and guidance*, e.g. for those thinking about commissioning an evaluation for the first time. The plan indicated a range of possible approaches including from an *interest group* to a *learned society* to an exclusive *chartered profession*. The range of services it provided would depend on which approach was chosen.



The draft plan somewhat shook the full Committee. Consensus was reached that the AES should be a 'learned society' promoting the field of knowledge covered by evaluation and providing services to its members. It should not become exclusive, seeking to provide accreditation and restricted membership. It was decided that the corporate plan and the Committee discussions should be used by a new subcommittee to develop a new constitution.

By 1992 membership had risen to 565, and there were formal regional branches in Queensland and

Victoria with regular meetings in other State capitals and Wellington. Membership was roughly 60% public service and 30% academic and private sector, but concern was expressed at that year's conference that the *Evaluation Journal of Australasia* was primarily orientated to academics, and doubts were raised about its utility for the majority. The Publications Subcommittee brief was widened to include 'How to do it' booklets and other means of communication such as videos. Around this time the first issue of the newsletter *Evaluation News and Comment (EN&C)* was produced by the President with some paid help from an associate editor, Ann Neil. It was hoped to publish quarterly.

In September 1992 a crisis emerged. An overdue and previously obstructed audit found that the Treasurer had embezzled \$142,000 (including lost interest) and used the funds to purchase farmland in Esperance, Western Australia. Although some cash was repaid after a series of protracted negotiations, the AES instituted civil proceedings to seize the property and declare bankruptcy. The untimely death of the ex-treasurer in April 93 left the Society with interests in a car and poor quality farmland. The Esperance property was finally sold in December 1993 for much less than expected, and after deducting legal and other costs the AES received only \$2500.

The amount of additional work brought on by this situation hastened the necessity to employ a part-time Administration Officer. An office was also set up in Darrel Caulley's home rent free and some computer equipment acquired. This provided the first permanent address and phone and fax numbers for the AES. New financial and administrative procedures were established.

Fortunately the Society retained significant liquidity to continue most key activities. But the crisis sent a message that AES must live within its operating income to protect and slowly enhance its reserves. For the first time an annual budget was prepared in the following year as part of tightening up financial management. EN&C was reduced to two editions a year, the part-time support reduced, the proposed booklets put on hold and the journal subscription fee increased.

The Constitution Subcommittee met over an intensive weekend in Melbourne late in 1992. The existing constitution was a standard model used for associations, clubs and societies in Victoria. It no longer met the needs of the evolving AES where functions were managed by subcommittees or designated positions. It did not cater for an international organisation with members in all Australian States, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Indonesia and the USA. Some regions had developed semi-autonomous branches and there was a need to clarify powers and financial relationships. It was proving legally deficient. As well as reviewing these reasons for change, the group reviewed the constitutions of the AEA, the CES and several Australian learned societies and drew on the previous year's draft strategic corporate plan.

The group also reviewed and revised the AES aims and objectives (see p20). Key findings of the weekend's discussions were brought together under two headings – Characteristics and Constraints, and Guiding Principles. I have reproduced these in full here, as they have not been published elsewhere, and together they define what the AES had become by ten years ago and where it was going.

The General Committee meeting and AGM at the 1993 conference were among the more far-reaching in AES history. It was decided to reconstitute under recent federal legislation based in ACT which better limited the liability of the management board. There was major debate around changing from a small body focused on networking to a larger organisation providing services to members. There had been concern that the Executive was too powerful and operated too loosely. At the same time the General Committee had grown to around 30 to provide representation and a check on the Executive. There was therefore concern at the recommendation to reduce the size of the management board.

The result of these debates was the AGM supporting a new constitution with a Board of Management made up of the office-bearers (president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer), a single representative from each region, and up to five more members appointed by this initial group. The Executive was increased to the four office-bearers plus up to three elected from within the Board. The Executive would meet face to face at least twice a year, including at the AGM, whereas the Board would meet physically only once, with teleconferences to consider major issues and ratify actions of the Executive.

The definition of Australasia was also raised, as formal references suggested it only covered Australia and New Zealand, whereas most thought it extended to Oceania and some thought South-East Asia. This became important because of attendees from the latter attracted to the AES by its broad regional scope.

Queensland was still the largest and most active regional branch. Victoria appeared to have lapsed in activity over the year, but WA had been formally accepted as a regional branch and meetings had been held in NSW, SA, Tasmania and NZ.

Falling interest in the Clearinghouse on Training and comments from the Training in Evaluation SIG led to the formation of a Subcommittee on Training and Professional Development, consisting of Jerome Winston, Brian English and Chris Curteis. This committee has stayed as one of the four major standing committees since then, along with Publications, Ethics & Standards and Awards.

Colin Sharp as President-elect for the next term of 1994–95 presented a discussion paper to the General Committee on a '*Tentative Strategy for the AES for the next Presidency*'. The Strategy assured the continuity of function and leadership of the AES and a strategic marketing focus, but provided for a new SWOT analysis. Colin went back to a keynote

## CHARACTERISTICS & CONSTRAINTS

- Insufficient membership in most regions to provide a critical mass which can sustain independent branches capable of implementing the aims and objectives.
- Focus on a regional structure is unlikely to maintain core activities of the journal, newsletter and conference.
- AES does not have the capacity of larger or higher profited organisations which attract additional funding or assistance with resources.
- AES objectives focus activity on the wider evaluation community rather than the provision of exclusive services for members.
- Protection of the name, image, and credibility of the AES is increasingly a vital consideration.
- Activities and structure need to match the reality of resourcing with main funding from subscriptions and conference revenue and with inputs focused on volunteers rather than paid staff.
- Potential benefits of increased funding from corporate membership are likely to be more than offset by reduction in other members as well as increase the administrative costs of servicing them.

# AES aims & objectives

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Management should be by a small group which meets in person two or three times a year (once at the Conference) to improve manageability and efficiency, reduce costs, whilst ensuring representativeness in decision making.
- Management will be by a committee of equals to ensure democratic representation of the regions.
- AES needs to maintain a central capability to further its aim and objectives whilst providing for devolution of authority to sub-groups.
- Sub-groups should have financial support in furthering the AES objectives.
- Sub-groups might be expected to generate additional funds within agreed guidelines.
- Sub-groups will rise and fall with changing needs, including the coordination of core activities.
- Where financial authority is delegated, the minimum requirement is that the sub-group maintain appropriate books which are audited annually and reported to the central body.
- Sub-groups may be geographically, functionally or interest-based.
- The Board of Management should comprise an Executive of four elected office bearers, with defined responsibilities, and elected sub-group representatives.
- The sub-group for representation on the Board at this stage should be based on regional sub-groups with a minimum membership capable of promoting the aim and objectives of the AES – probably a minimum of five to ten members.
- The Board will appoint from within it Board members to liaise with or act as members of standing committees and/or convenors of special interest groups.
- Members' liability must be limited.

address by Michael Quinn Patton to the 1989 NEC suggesting that for evaluation to thrive as a profession it needed a vision, quality products and processes, and skilled and trained evaluators. Colin proposed that the Society:

- develop and implement a new code of ethics and guide on standards for the AES and evaluation practitioners in the region
- take the AES to the Asia-Pacific region by forming an interim SIG on 'Evaluation in the Asia-Pacific Region' and requesting the Conference Planning Sub-committee to focus on the larger region in planning, particularly for the 1996 conference to be held in NZ

- publish a 10-year history of AES in 1997.

It was decided to circulate the paper to regions for comment and to hold a special meeting before the General Committee meeting prior to the 1994 conference.

The Canberra Conference in 1994 drew 360 attendees, well below the expected attendance of over 450, possibly due to the high registration fee. This led to discussions to try to set a benchmark at no more than \$600. An innovation in the program was a very entertaining and educational hypothetical, following through a Minister's bright idea without adequate analysis and trying to retrieve it by evaluation as it began to fall apart. Realism

was intense, with a Senate Minister, a leading TV interviewer, a union leader and a range of officials playing their real-life roles.

The special strategic planning workshop led by Colin Sharp, Sue Funnell and Judith Aitken revisited the SWOT analysis. While confirming the role of the AES as a broker between suppliers of evaluation method and techniques on the supply side, and askers and doers on the demand side, the analysis indicated strong threats from the quality movement and pressures to meet ISO standards. A surprising number of members who had previously strongly opposed accreditation now wanted to reconsider this in light of pressures from the quality movement and interest in meeting ISO standards.

### The middle years

The two years from 1995 saw a slackening of interest in evaluation among governments in several jurisdictions, which had an impact on the fortunes of AES. The changes meant that numbers at the Sydney Conference in 1995 were lower than expected at only 390. The closure during 1996 of the regional offices of the Commonwealth Department of Finance had a major impact on the AES through the reduction of the support they had provided in such areas as training, assistance with regional mailouts, and supplying speakers.

In January 1995 the Strategic Planning Committee produced a draft plan *The AES: Leading Evaluation Theory, Practices and Use into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. In March the Training and Professional Development Subcommittee produced an issues paper highlighting:

- identification and monitoring of members' needs
- how AES could best meet these
- the role of the annual conferences in training and development
- activities and workshops to further training and development beyond annual conferences; and
- accreditation – its feasibility, advantages and disadvantages.

In August the subcommittee distributed a comprehensive questionnaire to regions on training undertaken by members over the previous three years, what was needed, and their views on core competencies for evaluation. In its summary of the responses, the subcommittee raised the need to decide on:

- continuing existing AES vehicles – regional networking, Special Interest Groups, conferences & publications
- extending to advise on training and development opportunities
- providing training itself
- becoming a broker; and
- considering accreditation.

### First International Evaluation Conference, Vancouver, November 1995

During 1993 it was agreed to respond to an invitation made through Jerome Winston to serve on program and marketing committees for the first international evaluation conference at Vancouver in 1995, provided this did not lock AES into future financial or other commitments. Ralph Straton, who was on a sabbatical in the USA, acted as our initial liaison, and later Jim Stevenson from the Dept. of Finance, seconded to Washington.

The conference was jointly organised by the CES and AEA, who made some effort to involve the AES, the Central American Evaluation Society and, at Colin Sharp's insistence, the new UK and European Evaluation Societies. Attendance was 1700, including forty from Australia and seven from NZ. There was much debate on the ongoing dichotomies in evaluation – summative vs. formative, qualitative vs. quantitative, internal vs. external, independent situation reporting vs. ongoing improvement – as well as on meta-evaluation and moves from program evaluation to policy evaluation.

It was noticeable that in North America those who departed from the norm and promoted new theory were elevated and treated as celebrities, whereas in the Antipodes the tall poppy syndrome prevailed. Both the CES and the AEA were still debating issues of professionalism and how far to move toward legislative recognition, with views fairly evenly split. I found it surprising that no opportunity was provided for leaders of the then six evaluation societies to consider the utility of periodic joint international conferences.

Early in 1996 the Membership Committee developed a plan which acknowledged the central services but emphasised regional activities like training, access to close expertise and advice, and opportunity to share difficulties and successes, all of which were seen to add value and were not available from other organisations. It proposed regional action plans with 6-monthly reporting, regional liaison with SIGs, publication of a membership brochure, analysis of lapsed members, identification of regional organisations that might be interested, help to members to speak to others through use of a recruitment pack, and the collection of more information about members' interests to better service their needs.

The Training and Professional Development Committee reported in mid-1996 that it needed more information on members' experience in use of and needs for training and development. It noted that normal university processes for accrediting courses for evaluation should be appropriate, but AES might wish to seek involvement in assessment panels. It noted variations in regional emphasis on different competencies, and also that regions were catering for many more than just AES members. It pointed out some overlaps with the Publications Review, noting that *EJA* as a flagship sought to demonstrate the credibility and enhance the status of the AES but had no particular focus on training, whilst the *EN&C* ranged widely across readers' needs and made a significant contribution. It also commented that the

previous moves to prepare specific 'How to' booklets could be met by using *EN&C*.

Later in that year Maggie Jakob-Hoff & Carolyn Coggan prepared a paper on *Core Competencies for Evaluation*. The authors assumed that evaluation was a unique discipline, though borrowing skills and knowledge from others. They acknowledged the debate on whether evaluators need content-specific knowledge, or whether practitioners with generic evaluation skills can produce successful evaluations with limited content-specific knowledge, favouring the latter view. They assumed that evaluators must be responsive to client needs and sensitive in multicultural societies to issues like ethnicity, race, gender, age, social class, and disability. Their model included generic competencies such as research skills, organisational/management theory, project management skills, ethical behaviour, communication skills and change skills, along with specific competencies such as understanding what evaluation is and its role, understanding debates surrounding evaluation and their implications for practice, ability to make judgements based on information collected, and ability to ensure maximum utilisation of evaluation findings. The final two skill sets they identified were synthesis skills to combine the other competencies, and intuition.

The Board meeting at the 1996 conference endorsed a plan by the Training and Development Committee to

- identify training and development opportunities in universities
- liaise with trainers to make specific modules/courses and develop promotional strategies; and
- continue work on competencies.

Later the Committee proposed to employ two contract research assistants to help collect information for a training directory. This was deferred until a joint meeting with the Electronic Communication Committee to consider using the website for listing potential suppliers or providing links to their sites for a fee. This also related to a paper by Chris Milne on conflicts of interest for regional reps in providing information on local courses and consultants on an ad hoc basis. He suggested the setting up of a database of those who offer services on the condition that that AES did not endorse or accredit the services, although it would take reasonable care to make sure claims were accurate by requiring applicants to provide two referees to confirm the information for AES use only. Regional committees would be asked to vet the information and if necessary negotiate agreed statements of experience. The aim in bringing together this material was to avoid any AES administration burden or being arbiters of quality.

The NZ groups combined to prepare a business case to use some of the surplus from the 1996 Wellington conference for a NZ Pilot Training Project, aimed at extending knowledge and skills, and providing a qualification, a path towards one

### Special Interest Groups

These were introduced, I think, by Darrel Caulley, after the model of the AEA's TIGs (topical interest groups), which in my opinion are one of its greatest strengths in the way it has developed and used them. To some extent they provide the AEA with a cabinet system for communication and governance, nurturing and mentoring. On reflection, I believe that Darrel actively encouraged SIGs during the crisis of 1992 to help hold the organisation together informally. After he left the presidency he continued as SIG co-ordinator until this role was taken over by Judith Aitken as vice-president.

From 1995 to 1997, as evaluation ceased to be mandated by the Australian States and the Federal government's interest waned, it became difficult to provide leadership and maintain a critical mass to provide a range of inputs and outputs. In its heyday the annual conferences were actively encouraged to provide times for SIG meetings and the co-ordinators actively tried to identify and encourage group leaders. In 1990–91 SIGs covered education evaluation, health evaluation, microcomputers in evaluation, evaluation of trainers and staff developers, and evaluation and program management. Over the next 5–6 years they expanded to include qualitative methodology, quantitative methodology, cross-cultural evaluation, teaching evaluation, and economics in evaluation.

SIGs still exist, but they do not appear to be recorded in annual reports nor to be as actively encouraged. Certainly the constitution was written envisaging their playing a major role. Perhaps we just need a few enthusiastic potential SIG leaders to bring about more of the benefits associated with the AEA TIGs

or a certificate of accomplishment. This was seen as a pilot regional development project testing the logistics for refresher training. The pilot was based around the AES-derived competencies and included four parts:

- familiarisation with selected readings
- a block course on evaluation theory
- a block course on practice and methodologies; and
- a written paper for assessment.

The course was to be delivered at three locations over two weekends and the intervening week, with up to 30 places. Training was to be provided by Australian academics, preferably linked to NZ trainers to facilitate cultural match. Candidates were expected to range from proficient to approaching expert, i.e. no novices. The Board agreed to call for proposals and costings, subject to fees being set on the basis of break-even for members and a surcharge for non-members to provide a buffer.

Also during 1996, the Board agreed to explore additional membership benefits such as reduced costs for presentation training by Toastmasters, and reduced banking and phone charges. These suggestions came out of concerns over falling membership in the ACT

and Queensland, mainly as a result of government policy and structural changes.

### The later years

The Adelaide Conference in 1997 had a strong focus on the third (i.e. community) sector. I also remember it for a record attendance of 49 participants from NZ out of a total of 280, including a smattering from Europe, the USA and Canada who had been attracted from the website.

At that time evaluation was in a state of flux around the world. On the one hand some countries were dropping formal mandates, and on the other there was a realisation that only through evaluation could the success of major programs be judged. In some places more effort was being made to link budget processes, formal audits and evaluations. A number of countries were using sunset clauses in legislation or corporate/strategic plans to ensure progress (formative) and formal summative evaluation. There were particular concerns in managing health with its growing size and complexities.

As incoming President, Sue Funnell followed what had become a tradition of presenting her strategic directions for the coming year. From reviewing activities and accomplishments she identified four issues and challenges:

- to ensure projects fulfilled their potential
- maintenance of core services
- a shared understanding of the fundamental features of evaluation
- AES functioned efficiently as an organisation.

She proposed a more disciplined project management approach, with clear objectives and a timetable, and with one person in each project especially focused on the regional perspective and implementation at that level. She noted that significant developments had been made in the new area of electronic communications, whilst struggling with some core services – conference attendance had started to drop and there were now commercially driven competitive evaluation conferences, the Journal was struggling, and so were some regions, with Tasmania in recess.

She proposed more of a joint-venture approach with academic institutions for the Journal, possibly a larger single issue each year rather than struggling with two. She advocated more support and personal intervention by the Executive for flagging regions. Professional pressures were increasing with requests for information about evaluators and comment about professional issues such as standards. There was some overlap among professional societies and competition for members. AES needed a clearer view of good and bad practice and competencies. We were not alone, as the CES and AEA were grappling with the same issues. We also needed a better record of the Society's approach and policies so that these could be better drawn upon, or their original rationale understood when changes appeared necessary.

Sue also urged that better use be made of the experience of past Board members and strategic alliances considered with some allied professions, e.g. internal auditors. New approaches such as advertising, sponsorship and cost recovery could all have a profound influence on the future. She advocated three standing committees – Awards and Standards, Professional Training and Development, and Publications – with other matters to be dealt with by project taskforces.

The Northern Territory was approved as a new region with 30 members after active support by the Auditor-General and the Public Service Commissioner. Later in the year approval was given for a South Island NZ region based on Christchurch, with a core of 10–15 members.

The Adelaide conference wound up with an unexpected profit of over \$78,000. The SA region prepared a business case to use part of the profit to develop a manual and workshop for community sector and Aboriginal sector evaluation. Later it was intended to try to make this proposal a joint venture with research, industrial research and training interests, but it never quite came to fruition.

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Arising from her initial strategic directions paper, and as a precursor to developing the initial draft Sponsorship and Advertising policy, Sue Funnell early in her term prepared an insightful and far-reaching paper on *Values and Principles for Board Decision Making*. At one stage it was suggested that it be published with the Constitution, but after being worked over with much debate and going through a few iterations it became an underpinning document to the Compendium of Board Policies. In order demonstrate the thought and range of considerations that Boards must consider, I have summarised these as follows:

#### Values and guiding principles

- Overarching commitment to service members, making every effort to ensure
  - Service to members takes priority
  - Exchange of information is maximised
  - Privacy is respected
  - Links among members and others with evaluation interests are fostered
  - Collegiality is fostered – AES to be inclusive rather than exclusive or hierarchical & mutually supportive instead of having a competitive orientation
- Equitable treatment of members and respect for differences
- Affordability – core services are to be affordable to all members
- Value for members' subscription is maximised

- Cost-recovery for services not available to all members and/or available to non-members, but benefits to members and AES corporate values take precedence over revenue-raising

Publications continued to be a problem, with no issues of the *EJA* in 1997 and complaints from library subscribers. It was decided to produce a bumper issue in 1998 and give the libraries a refund, and then to review the position. A teleconference involving John Wilson, Colin Sharp, Brian English and Darrel Caulley reiterated the Journal's importance for academic publication, and decided that no conference papers should be published as presented without further polishing and the Publications Committee would have to chase articles. Two other professional organisations to which I belong were also having problems around this time, which in one case led to a combination of its journal and magazine, ensuring a distinction for refereed articles.

Professional Training and Development was advanced by the NZ Pilot Training Project summer school held in winter for 50 students (plus a short waiting list) in two courses at Wellington by John Owen and Ros Hurworth from the Centre for Program Evaluation at Melbourne University. About 60% were AES members and 40% non-members who paid \$NZ 1600–1850. Students were given access to the University library and website for a semester. It turned out to be very successful and thoughts were given to repeating it in Darwin and Townsville. It also flushed out some issues around intellectual property and how long the rights of the presenters should last.

Work on the competencies was reviewed and placed into a more general UK professional competency model. Other countries' work in the same area was also considered. There were still difficulties associated with defining evaluation and the levels of competencies required by those playing different roles in evaluation – commissioning, managing, evaluating, researching and training.

Arising from the 1996 Vancouver International Conference, an informal forum of evaluation societies had developed. This led to proposals for a meeting of the Panel of Presidents in Chicago in November 1998. The Board supported AES involvement and considered the implications of various possibilities, including a new international evaluation organisation, an international association in which the current regional societies would become chapters, and a federation of the existing seven societies. Sue also conducted the negotiations which led to a formal agreement that members of AES & CES could have status as Associate Subscribers (members) of the other organisation at discounted rates, without voting rights and without access to awards.

The Melbourne Conference in 1998 was held in the luxurious downtown Hotel Sofitel. Despite a Statewide gas strike and a general election, 350 attended, presenting over 100 papers. I noted at the time that the quality of the fourteen pre-conference workshops and the provision of focused sessions

on professional topics were now providing more scope for professional development. In a session on ethics it was great to have managers very openly expose critical issues which had faced them, the options they considered and why particular courses of action were taken. There was very high audience participation and clear appreciation of the opportunity to discuss such real issues.

The theme of *Evaluation: Investing in the Future*, and sub-themes around change, together with key speakers and participants from North America, UK, and Asian countries, highlighted some interesting international trends:

- a tension between 'heroic evaluators' focusing on social science research and 'renaissance evaluators' who see an expanding role across a wider range of activities and multi-disciplinary approaches
- increasing recognition of having evaluators involved in policy design so that the effectiveness and efficiency of applications are capable of being monitored and evaluated
- increasing complexity of issues involving multi-agency programs and partnerships between different levels of government, the voluntary sector and the private sector
- difficulties from evaluation dealing with values and judgements of worth while increasingly interfacing with politics
- more demand in the northern hemisphere for evaluation by the legislature as opposed to the executive
- the use in Japan of part-time voluntary counsellors who evaluate complaints against all levels of government.

There was an apparent move in Australia towards more selective evaluation as government restructuring had cut down internal evaluation units, with a number of more experienced practitioners becoming consultants.

Professional development and competencies had become caught up in the ongoing debate on accreditation and certification, but the Committee had decided to steer clear and concentrate on training needs. They had identified only a few Australian approaches and the competency framework the earlier committee had developed for the NZ Pilot Project. Other countries were also working in the area. The most useful was the UK, where the National Vocational Qualifications under development included a module on evaluation. As part of this process, Cheetham and Chivers in a paper *Towards a holistic model of professional competence* had identified four components:

- Functional competencies – tasks, skills
- Personal/Behavioural competencies – attributes
- Knowledge/Cognitive competencies – knowledge and application
- Values/Ethical competencies

The Committee drew all this material into a framework for circulation and comment. On the international front, Sue developed a draft position paper, adopted by the Board, supporting strategic alliances and international partnership rather than an overarching international organisation. The paper argued that value would be added by emphasising learning through diversity and seeking political support by avoiding any monopoly domination or single paradigm. It further advocated three broad approaches – build evaluation capacity by brokering information and synthesising evaluation results, contribute to knowledge about world issues, and enhance evaluation organisations. At a meeting convened by the AEA International and Cross Cultural Topical Interest Group, attended by four new associations – Kenya, Malaysia, Italy and Germany – the AES position was seen to be more advanced than most of the ten participants. A further meeting was planned for Italy in 1999 if foundation sponsorship could be organised to develop the concept. (An international umbrella group, the International Organisation for Cooperation in Evaluation, has since been formed with the AES President, Penny Hawkins, as a member of the Board.)

Concerns about financial losses at the Melbourne conference (fortunately a rare occurrence) led to a review of corporate governance by Treasurer Barry Shaw and Kate Stanton. It became obvious as a result of the financial problems with the Melbourne conference just how dependent the AES was on the revenue from conferences to pay for the ongoing running of the organisation. It also became apparent that despite its dependence on this revenue, the Board had minimal control over the conference budget and expenditure once it had approved the initial proposal. It also led to realisation that AES was living above its means and a more in-depth strategic review was required.

The review of corporate governance focused on the role of the Board, committees and management by the Executive and administration. It had a preliminary look at risk management and identified that the Executive might need more clearly delegated authority. It recommended establishing an Audit Committee and exploring reconstitution under federal corporations law and review of the election process. These recommendations were accepted, with Barry and Kate being appointed the Audit Committee together with an outsider to be added.

Over the Christmas-New Year break 1998–99, Sue and I with help from Anthea Rutter and Eve Barboza prepared a major review paper covering AES origins, achievements, nature of membership, fee structure, nature of current and emerging services, benefits and likely appeal to segments of members, modus operandi of the Board, prime sources of income and expenditure, and options for increasing revenue and reducing expenditure.

We found that membership had risen fourfold from 135 in 87–88 to 565 in 91–92, reached a plateau until 96–97 and then increased by 100 in 98–99. Fifty-three percent of members were now

drawn from the public sector, 16% from consultancy firms (many of them small), and 14% from higher education. Revenue was primarily from subscriptions, held constant since 1994, and from conference surpluses. Major development had occurred in electronic communications over the previous four years, largely through the generous sponsorship of ITS (International Technological Services) and IMM (Institute of Municipal Management), and was emerging as both a major research tool and a significant cost. With more regions and standing committees, Board meetings had become unwieldy with longer and more frequent meetings to get through the business. We also discovered that the move to centralise finances in order to meet audit requirements had reduced revenue by 20–30% by reducing regional inputs which had not formally gone through the main books.

The paper raised a number of options and was aimed at seeking the views and priorities of members. The Board agreed to undertake structured

Ethics was seen as an important and core function of a professional organisation's credibility and image.

interviews of a stratified sample of members. Only four regions completed the task, and the results of the 28 interviews were often split. They did reveal support for sponsorship and corporate membership, fewer Board teleconferences and continuation of the magazine, though views on the Journal were split. The membership directory was used, but less for finding consultants than expected, possibly because those who were local were already known. Ethics was seen as an important and core function of a professional organisation's credibility and image. Work on competencies had high support with comments that accreditation should focus on courses rather than people. Awards were also supported for their professional image, with suggestions that sponsors be sought. Surprisingly little support emerged for overseas initiatives.

The Executive decided to recommend that the Board meet only the minimum of three times annually required by the Constitution, with the Executive increased to a maximum of eight by adding a representative from standing committee chairs plus representatives from Australian and New Zealand regions, and meeting as required to progress the business. Normal membership was raised to \$105 with provision for fees to be reviewed annually against the CPI, and provision was made for student members. It was also decided to amend the Constitution to enable the Board to set fees and report them to the following AGM.

There were some strong reactions to the Executive's decision to cease publishing the Journal, and it was decided to defer this for the new Board to explore possibilities which included an electronic journal, combining with other evaluation journals, and picking up an offer by Colin Sharp to be editor. Subsequently it was decided to combine with the magazine but to include a section of refereed papers.

This was similar to the approach taken by some other smaller professional bodies.

The Perth Conference in 1999 exceeded expectations, for a location away from the eastern seaboard, with an attendance of around 230 and made a substantial surplus. Interest in the workshops was particularly high, with over 300 attending. This conference marked the end of Sue Funnell's term as President, and I was asked by several to stand. But after ten years at the centre I was feeling drained, with all my innovative ideas and efforts having already been contributed, especially over the previous two years as vice-president. I could also foresee difficulties in the role without the support of an organisation in the background, which my retirement after 41 years in the workforce precluded. It was time to pass over to new blood.

### Commentary

What does it actually take to provide a professional society? After reflecting on more than ten years of involvement in the AES in both regional and central positions, there are some points which clearly emerge:

- *Vision* – The Society would not exist nor have accomplished its many achievements without the vision of a number of people. All the Presidents I have served with have had vision, although it has varied from broad and far-reaching to narrower but intense in focus.
- *Leadership* – particularly the ability to embrace a vision, whether self-originated or evolved with others, and to communicate it to others so that they embrace it and together strive to implement it. We have been fortunate that most Boards have had at least two or three members with this ability. Similarly, most regions usually manage one or two for the local committee, but there are examples where their absence has led regions to go into recess until another emerges.
- *Critical mass* – Although much was achieved in the early days when AES was small, the range of professional services we now expect could not really have been contemplated until membership exceeded 300–400. For this reason I personally believe NZ is better to stay as part of a regional society than go on its own. It also brings much more experience and networking to bear, particularly, for sub-sectoral special interest groups. We have a long way to go to catch up with the utility that the AEA and CES get from their equivalents.
- *Recognition of professional expectations* – Practitioners expect at least some form of newsletter or learned journal, and usually some form of professional development or maintenance. The public expect professionals to keep up to date, as well as operate to a code of ethics and disciplinary procedures. At the same time, these *expectations must be realistic*, as it is impossible to do everything at once and overreaching can create problems.

- *Good communications* – up and down within the organisation; in and out of it, and within or around the regions and the corporate management. Maintaining good communications, at low cost, is a critical component in a federation of regions.
- *Good organisational dynamics* which balance good representation with efficiency, innovation with solid experience, and the needs of individuals, the regions, firms, the public and the collective professional interest.
- *Adequate records and clearly recorded policies* – This should ensure consistency over time and location, facilitate quick responses, and reduce re-litigation and reinventing the wheel. The AES Compendium of Board Policies was the envy of some of the other evaluation societies.
- *(especially) Dedicated people* – Without such people willing to give of themselves little would be accomplished, particularly for key positions of responsibility. Ideally they would bring a range of skills and experience and an ability to see different sides of an issue, recognise the importance of identifying and debating options, and most important, be willing to work hard for the common good.

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### Note

1. This article is an abridged version of a paper prepared for the Auckland 2003 conference committee and used to prepare a summary chronology of the AES and summaries on the evolution of major services and elements of management in a poster display (available on the AES website 2003 conference papers at: <http://www.aes.asn.au>). It also excludes the significant dimension of the AES activity with ethics and standards which have been extracted into a companion paper *Ethics and Standards – twelve years of mixed progress*.