



Australian Evaluation Society Ltd (AES)
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Consultation paper
Quality evaluation that makes a difference

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Prepared by the AES Project Team

Purpose of this paper

The AES's 2024–2028 Strategic Priorities set out a vision of *'quality evaluation that makes a difference'*. Under the Leadership domain, the AES committed to developing policy positions and guidance that give this vision greater substance, including a clearer articulation of what quality evaluation that makes a difference entails.

The AES Policy Committee established the Quality Evaluation That Makes a Difference project to progress this work. The project has drawn together evidence from past AES positions and documents, research into how evaluation societies internationally approach quality evaluation, literature on evaluation quality, use and influence, and perspectives from within the AES.

From this work, the project team has identified a set of six elements that appear consistently across the evidence and may provide a basis for articulating what *'quality evaluation that makes a difference'* means in the AES context. These elements are not a final AES position.

The purpose of this paper is to seek members' views on the emerging elements: whether they reflect what matters for quality evaluation that makes a difference, whether anything important is missing, and whether they could be expressed more clearly or usefully. Member input will inform the project team's further development of the AES position.

The AES vision and strategic context

The AES brings together members from diverse sectors and areas of practice to strengthen and promote evaluation practice, theory and use. The 2024–2028 Strategic Priorities, launched at the aes24 conference in Melbourne, are organised around four domains: Culture, Pathways, Leadership and Vitality.

The Leadership domain is where this project sits. Its strapline is 'the trusted voice on evaluation in Australia' and it is supported by the Board's Policy Committee. The domain's goals include ensuring that members have a clear idea of what the AES vision of *'quality evaluation that makes a difference'* entails, and that the AES is respected and sought out for comment and thought leadership on key issues and trends relevant to evaluation.

A key priority under this domain is to develop policy positions and guidance documents to support quality evaluation that makes a difference, in consultation with other committees, AES staff and members. The strategic priorities also call for leveraging the experience of Fellows and other experienced AES members.

This project directly addresses these priorities. It also connects to the other strategic domains. Under Culture, the AES is committed to culturally safe, trauma-informed and ethical practice as an essential evaluation competency, and to First Nations evaluators leading a community of practice shaping the aspirations and practice of evaluation. Under Pathways, the AES is working towards clear frameworks for guiding excellence in

professional practice. Any position on quality evaluation will need to be consistent with, and reinforce, these commitments.

What members told us in 2024

In mid-2024, the AES consulted members on the draft strategic priorities (Rutter 2024). Sixty-two members completed the online survey, with additional responses from regional groups, special interest groups and the Fellows Management Group. While the response rate was modest (around 5 per cent of the membership), the qualitative feedback was rich and considered.

On the Leadership domain specifically, the top priority nominated by members was to develop policy positions and guidance documents to support quality evaluation that makes a difference. Some members raised the question of how quality evaluation is defined and by whom, foreshadowing the very questions this consultation addresses. The feedback from respondents signalled strong interest in the AES taking a clearer position on what quality evaluation means, while being inclusive of diverse perspectives.

The Quality Evaluation That Makes a Difference project

The project to develop a policy position and guidance documents on ‘quality evaluation that makes a difference’ was launched at the 2025 AES International Evaluation Conference. Expressions of interest were sought from members to join a project team, which was formed in late 2025.

The project team brings together AES members with experience across government, not-for-profit organisations, consulting and international development, working across different areas of evaluation practice and geographic locations. Members bring a range of professional backgrounds, perspectives and experience to the project.

The project undertook three streams of data collection. The first was a review of AES documents and positions. The second was a literature review systematically identifying and analysing how relevant organisations in Australia and internationally have defined quality evaluation and its impact. The review explored what forms these definitions take (such as standards, principles, guidelines and competency frameworks), what evidence they draw on, what elements they address, and what their relevance is to the AES. The third was a high level review of the academic literature and key documents from the evaluation community that consider the various aspects of evaluation quality and use.

Elements of quality evaluation that makes a difference

The following elements have emerged consistently across the evidence reviewed. They are not confined to any single tradition: they surface independently across past AES positions, international evaluation society frameworks, the literature on evaluation use, and what members have said.

We recognise the importance of First Nations perspectives and that they are included throughout and do not simply add a cultural layer to an otherwise unchanged account of

quality. They reveal something more fundamental: that evaluation is not only a technical exercise in evidence and inference, but a relational practice.

These elements started life in the project team's thinking as 'principles', but as the work progressed it became clear that they describe something more like constituent elements of quality evaluation that makes a difference. They are not intended to be a complete or universally applicable list.

What matters, and the relative priority or weight given to different elements, will depend on the purpose, context and circumstances of an evaluation. Some elements may be particularly important in some contexts and less relevant in others. The elements are therefore intended as a basis for thinking about quality evaluation, rather than a checklist to be applied uniformly to every evaluation.

Elements of Quality Evaluation that Make a Difference:

1. It has a clear purpose and is useful. Quality evaluation is designed to address questions that matter to commissioners and stakeholders, to provide accountability, inform decisions, and informs learning and improvement. It makes a difference by generating findings that are timely, relevant and actionable.

2. It is well-reasoned and uses proportionate judgement. Quality evaluation produces judgements supported by credible, transparent reasoning that links evidence to conclusions. It makes a difference by drawing on appropriate methods and forms of knowledge in proportion to the scale, complexity and risk of the initiative.

3. It is legitimate, has authority and is relational. Quality evaluation is conducted in ways that are accountable to people, place and community. It makes a difference by enabling those with cultural, community or lived expertise to play a meaningful role in defining value, interpreting evidence and shaping conclusions.

4. It acknowledges multiple knowledge systems. Quality evaluation draws on scientific, professional, lived and cultural knowledge, without assuming that any single form is universally sufficient. It makes a difference by ensuring that the weight given to different forms of knowledge is determined in context, with appropriate authority.

5. It reflects ethical practice that strengthens and sustains relationships. Quality evaluation is conducted in ways that are appropriate for the people, places and communities involved, and enables people with diverse perspectives and experience to participate. It supports people and communities to make informed choices about when and how they engage and contributes to the capability of people, communities and systems. It makes a difference by recognising that evaluation is not only a means of judgement, but a practice that strengthens relationships and leaves systems better able to learn over time.

6. It is delivered by competent practitioners who are reflective. Quality evaluation requires practitioners who have the knowledge, skills and judgement to do the work well, and the humility and self-awareness to recognise the limits of their own perspectives and values. It makes a difference through its competent delivery which includes technical and methodological capability, cultural understanding, relational skill and the capacity for reflective practice.