

AUSTRALASIAN  
**EVALUATION**  
SOCIETY INC.

**GUIDELINES**  
for the  
**ETHICAL CONDUCT**  
of  
**EVALUATIONS**

**AES GUIDELINES**



## AIMS OF THE AES

**The Society aims to improve the theory, practice and use of evaluation through:**

- ▶ establishing and promoting ethics and standards in evaluation practice
- ▶ providing a forum for the discussion of ideas including society publications, seminars and conferences
- ▶ linking members who have similar evaluation interests providing education and training in matters related to evaluation
- ▶ recognising outstanding contributions to the theory and/ or practice of evaluation
- ▶ acting as an advocate for evaluation in Australasia, and
- ▶ other activities consistent with the aims



## AES GUIDELINES

for the **ETHICAL CONDUCT** of **EVALUATIONS**



# **GUIDELINES FOR THE ETHICAL CONDUCT OF EVALUATIONS**

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The AES appreciates feedback about these Guidelines. Please direct comments to members of the AES Board or a member of the AES Ethics Committee. Contact details are available on [www.aes.asn.au](http://www.aes.asn.au), or through the AES Secretariat phone **+61 2 6262 9093**, email **aes@aes.asn.au**

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## PREFACE

### BACKGROUND

The Guidelines were endorsed by the Board of the Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) in December 1997, following a process of development and consultation with members over a number of years. In early 1998 they were distributed to AES members and to organisations involved in evaluation in Australia and New Zealand, and are now published on the AES web site [www.aes.asn.au](http://www.aes.asn.au). Over this time they have been widely used as a training resource, and by many organisations to inform their evaluation policies.

In December 2000 the Guidelines were incorporated into the **AES Code of Ethics** which applies to all AES members. The Guidelines were reprinted in May 2002, July 2006 and August 2010.

### PURPOSE OF THE GUIDELINES

Ethics refers to right and wrong in conduct. These are guidelines for ethical behaviour and decision making in evaluation. They are intended firstly to promote the ethical practice of evaluation. Through stimulating awareness and discussion of ethical issues, the Guidelines aim to foster continuing improvement in the theory, practice and use of evaluation.

Secondly, the Guidelines aim to help people to recognise and resolve particular ethical issues that arise in the course of an evaluation. The AES encourages the Guidelines to be used as a framework for discussing ethical issues with people involved in evaluation. If an impasse is reached regarding an ethical issue, the parties should attempt to resolve the matter by drawing on the Guidelines and other relevant ethical standards such as the **Program Evaluation Standards** (below).

Organisations developing their own manuals and guidelines for evaluation may find the Guidelines a useful resource. While organisations are free to use the Guidelines in this manner, the AES expects appropriate acknowledgment.

## **SCOPE**

The Guidelines are directed to all those who commission, prepare, conduct and use evaluations, as well as those who research, teach and publish about evaluation, particularly in Australia and New Zealand. All these roles are represented amongst members of the AES. While the Guidelines are designed for members of the AES, everybody involved in evaluations is invited to adopt them.

The focus of the Guidelines is the evaluation of programs but also apply to the evaluation of policies and strategies. The Guidelines would have some application to other types of evaluation, such as evaluation of personnel and of products. However there are other guidelines and standards – some additional and some different – that would also apply to those other types of evaluation.

The Guidelines refer to three main stages of program evaluation: commissioning and preparing, conducting, and reporting. They outline procedures that might be adopted to ensure that ethical principles are observed at each of these stages.

Ethical principles rather than procedural guidelines are the final touchstone against which decisions about ethics should be made, and the Guidelines are a means to this end. There will be a range of acceptable variations on these procedures for addressing a particular principle.

## **TERMINOLOGY**

While many definitions of *evaluation* are used, the term generally encompasses the systematic collection and analysis of information to make judgements, usually about the effectiveness, efficiency and/or appropriateness of an activity. The Guidelines cover the evaluation of *programs*, used here in a broad sense to refer to any set of procedures, activities, resources, policies and/or strategies designed to achieve some common goals or objectives.

A program evaluation can involve a wide range of stakeholders with an interest in the program and/or the evaluation. The two stakeholders whose conduct the Guidelines primarily address are:



- *the commissioners* of the evaluation, who decide that an evaluation is required for a particular purpose, and have the authority and resources to enable it to be undertaken
- *the evaluation team or the evaluator*, who undertake the hands-on work of the evaluation including detailed planning, collecting and analysing data, and preparing and presenting reports

Other stakeholders in an evaluation referred to in the Guidelines are those with an interest in the program which is under evaluation, including *clients* or *beneficiaries* who directly receive the outputs delivered by the program, *target groups* who are intended to receive the ultimate benefit of the program, and the *management and staff* of the program.

Where the evaluation team are employed within the organisation responsible for the program, the evaluation may be referred to as an *internal evaluation*, and where they are from outside the organisation, the evaluation may be referred to as an *external evaluation*. In either case, the commissioners of the evaluation may be either internal or external to the organisation responsible for the program.

The Guidelines are intended to apply to all program evaluations whether internal or external and whether large or small. When the Guidelines use terms such as *commissioning* and *contractual arrangements*, these terms are intended to encompass the varying degrees of formality required by different evaluations.

## **RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER GUIDELINES, STANDARDS AND PRINCIPLES**

The Guidelines are designed to suit the cultural, social and institutional contexts of evaluation in Australia and New Zealand. They are complemented by guides and standards developed by other professional groups involved in evaluation around the world. These include

**The Program Evaluation Standards** (2nd Edition, Sage 1994) which were endorsed by the Board of the AES in 1996; the American Evaluation Association's **Guiding Principles for Evaluators** (1994)

<http://www.eval.org/Publications/GuidingPrinciples.asp> and the Canadian Evaluation Society's **Guidelines For Ethical Conduct**

<http://www.evaluationcanada.ca>

The AES Society adopted its **Code of Ethics** in December 2000 which focuses on the behaviour of members. Its first code is 1. When commissioning, conducting or reporting an evaluation, members should strive to uphold the ethical principles and associated procedures endorsed by the Society in the **Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations**. The AES is also investigating the development of standards for evaluation in Australia and New Zealand.

The Australasian Evaluation Society also recognises that many of those involved in evaluation belong to professions or organisations which have their own codes of conduct, and that these codes need to be balanced against the Guidelines when conducting an evaluation. In addition, the conduct of any evaluation must, of course, conform to Australian and New Zealand legislation and legal practice (for example, in areas such as privacy).

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Ethical guides and codes are typically based on the issues we know about but have to deal with the unforeseen dilemmas that emerge in the future. As society changes, as the field of evaluation evolves, and as the profession develops, one of the few certainties is that new ethical questions will arise for people involved in evaluation. At some stage, it is likely that the AES may decide to review and revise these Guidelines.

To assist this process, the AES appreciates feedback about how the Guidelines have been used, their strengths and weaknesses, and ways of improving them. If you have any comments or questions about the Guidelines, please contact a member of the AES Board.

Contact details are available at [www.aes.asn.au](http://www.aes.asn.au)



**Dr Jenny Neale**

President, Australasian Evaluation Society

August 2010





## **GUIDELINES FOR THE ETHICAL CONDUCT OF EVALUATIONS**

### **A COMMISSIONING AND PREPARING FOR AN EVALUATION**

#### **PRINCIPLE**

All parties involved in commissioning and conducting an evaluation should be fully informed about what is expected to be delivered and what can reasonably be delivered so that they can weigh up the ethical risks before entering an agreement.

#### **PRINCIPLE**

All persons who might be affected by whether or how an evaluation proceeds should have an opportunity to identify ways in which any risks might be reduced.

#### **GUIDELINES**

##### **Briefing document**

1. Those commissioning an evaluation should prepare a briefing document or terms of reference that states the rationale, purpose and scope of the evaluation, the key questions to be addressed, any preferred approaches, issues to be taken into account, and the intended audiences for reports of the evaluation. The commissioners have an obligation to identify all stakeholders in the evaluation and to assess the potential effects and implications of the evaluation on them, both positive and negative.

##### **Identify limitations, different interests**

2. In responding to an evaluation brief, evaluators should explore the shortcomings and strengths of the brief. They should identify any likely methodological or ethical limitations of the proposed evaluation, and their possible effect upon the conduct and results of the evaluation. They should make distinctions between the interests of the commissioner and other stakeholders in the evaluation, and highlight the possible impacts of the evaluation on other stakeholders.

## **Contractual arrangement**

3. An evaluation should have an agreed contractual arrangement between those commissioning the evaluation and the evaluators. It should specify conditions of engagement, resources available, services to be rendered, any fees to be paid, time frame for completing the evaluation, ownership of materials and intellectual properties, protection of privileged communication, storage and disposal of all information collected, procedures for dealing with disputes, any editorial role of the commissioner, the publication and release of evaluation report(s), and any subsequent use of evaluation materials.

## **Advise changing circumstances**

4. Both parties have the right to expect that contractual arrangements will be followed. However, each party has the responsibility to advise the other about changing or unforeseen conditions or circumstances, and should be prepared to renegotiate accordingly.

## **Look for potential risks or harms**

5. The decision to undertake an evaluation or specific procedures within an evaluation should be carefully considered in the light of potential risks or harms to the clients, target groups or staff of the program. As far as possible, these issues should be anticipated and discussed during the initial negotiation of the evaluation.

## **Practise within competence**

6. The evaluator or evaluation team should possess the knowledge, abilities, skills and experience appropriate to undertake the tasks proposed in the evaluation. Evaluators should fairly represent their competence, and should not practice beyond it.



### **Disclose potential conflict of interest**

7. In responding to a brief, evaluators should disclose any of their roles or relationships that may create potential conflict of interest in the conduct of the evaluation. Any such conflict should also be identified in the evaluation documents including the final report.

### **Compete honourably**

8. When evaluators compete for an evaluation contract, they should conduct themselves in a professional and honourable manner.

### **Deal openly and fairly**

9. Those commissioning an evaluation and/or selecting an evaluator should deal with all proposals openly and fairly, including respecting ownership of materials, intellectual property and commercial confidence.

## B CONDUCTING AN EVALUATION

### PRINCIPLE

An evaluation should be designed, conducted and reported in a manner that respects the rights, privacy, dignity and entitlements of those affected by and contributing to the evaluation.

### PRINCIPLE

An evaluation should be conducted in ways that ensure that the judgements that are made as a result of the evaluation and any related actions are based on sound and complete information. This principle is particularly important for those evaluations that have the capacity to change the total quantum and/or distribution of program benefits or costs to stakeholders in the program.

### GUIDELINES

#### Consider implications of differences and inequalities

10. Account should be taken of the potential effects of differences and inequalities in society related to race, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical or intellectual ability, religion, socio-economic or ethnic background in the design conduct and reporting of evaluations. Particular regard should be given to any rights, protocols, treaties or legal guidelines which apply.

#### Identify purpose and commissioners

11. Evaluators should identify themselves to potential informants or respondents and advise them of the purpose of the evaluation and the identity of the commissioners of the evaluation.

#### Obtain informed consent

12. The informed consent of those directly providing information should be obtained, preferably in writing. They should be advised as to what information will be sought, how the information will be recorded and used, and the likely risks and benefits arising from their participation in the evaluation. In the case of minors and other dependents, informed consent should also be sought from parents or guardians.



<b>Be sufficiently rigorous</b>	13. The evaluation should be rigorous in design, data collection and analysis to the extent required by the intended use of the evaluation.
<b>Declare limitations</b>	14. Where the evaluator or evaluation team is faced with circumstances beyond their competence, they should declare their limitations to the commissioner of the evaluation.
<b>Maintain confidentiality</b>	15. During the course of the evaluation, the results and other findings should be held as confidential until released by the commissioner, and in accordance with any consent arrangements agreed with contributors. Confidentiality arrangements should extend to the storage and disposal of all information collected. Consent arrangements may include provision for release of information for purposes of formative evaluation and for purposes of validation of evaluation findings.
<b>Report significant problems</b>	16. If the evaluator discovers evidence of an unexpected and significant problem with the program under evaluation or related matters, they should report this as soon as possible to the commissioner of the evaluation, unless this constitutes a breach of rights for those concerned.

### **Anticipate serious wrong doing**

17. Where evaluators discover evidence of criminal activity or potential activity or other serious harm or wrong doing (for example, alleged child sexual abuse), they have ethical and legal responsibilities including:

- to avoid or reduce any further harm to victims of the wrongdoing
- to fulfill obligations under law or their professional codes of conduct, which may include reporting the discovery to the appropriate authority
- to maintain any agreements made with informants regarding confidentiality

These responsibilities may conflict, and also go beyond the evaluator's competence. For a particular evaluation, evaluators should anticipate the risk of such discoveries, and develop protocols for identifying and reporting them, and refer to the protocols when obtaining informed consent from people providing information (Guideline 12).



## C REPORTING THE RESULTS OF AN EVALUATION

### **PRINCIPLE**

The evaluation should be reported in such a way that audiences are provided with a fair and balanced response to the terms of reference for the evaluation.

### **GUIDELINES**

#### **Report clearly and simply**

18. The results of the evaluation should be presented as clearly and simply as accuracy allows so that clients and other stakeholders can easily understand the evaluation process and results. Communications that are tailored to a given stakeholder should include all important results.

#### **Report fairly and comprehensively**

19. Oral and written evaluation reports should be direct, comprehensive and honest in the disclosure of findings and the limitations of the evaluation. Reports should interpret and present evidence and conclusions in a fair manner, and include sufficient details of their methodology and findings to substantiate their conclusions.

#### **Identify sources and make acknowledgments**

20. The source of evaluative judgements (whether evaluator or other stakeholder) should be clearly identified. Acknowledgment should be given to those who contributed significantly to the evaluation, unless anonymity is requested, including appropriate reference to any published or unpublished documents.

#### **Fully reflect evaluator's findings**

21. The final report(s) of the evaluation should reflect fully the findings and conclusions determined by the evaluator, and these should not be amended without the evaluator's consent.

#### **Do not breach integrity of the reports**

22. In releasing information based on the reports of the evaluation, the commissioners have a responsibility not to breach the integrity of the reports.





## **AUSTRALASIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY INC.**

**mail:** PO Box 5223 Lyneham ACT 2602

**tel:** 02 6262 9093

**fax:** 02 6262 9095

**email:** [aes@aes.asn.au](mailto:aes@aes.asn.au)

**web:** [www.aes.asn.au](http://www.aes.asn.au)

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