



AUSTRALASIAN
EVALUATION
SOCIETY INC.

Guidelines

for the Ethical Conduct
of Evaluations

www.aes.asn.au

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The AES appreciates feedback about these Guidelines.
Contact details are available at www.aes.asn.au.

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The PDF version of the Guidelines includes hyperlinks to referenced documents and is available at www.aes.asn.au.



Background

The original 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. Since early 1998 they have served as a training resource, and have been used 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. Updated versions of the Code and Guidelines were endorsed in 2013; both are available on the AES website www.aes.asn.au.

Purpose of the guidelines

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

The Guidelines are also designed to be used as a framework for discussing ethical issues, and for helping people to recognise and resolve particular ethical issues that arise in the course of an evaluation. There is no simple recipe for ethical practice. 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. Resolution of ethical dilemmas needs to be based on principles and will benefit from discussion and advice from professional colleagues, as there will be a range of acceptable variations on these procedures for addressing a particular principle.

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 American Program Evaluation Standards (2nd Edition, Sage 1994). The AES is also investigating the development of standards for evaluation in Australasia.

Scope

The Guidelines refer to three main stages of 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.

The intended audience for the Guidelines are 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. While the Guidelines are designed for members of the AES, everybody involved in evaluations is invited to use them.

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 acknowledgement.

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 many types of initiatives, not just programs, but any set of procedures, activities, resources, policies and/or strategies designed to achieve some common goals or objectives.

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

- 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, and
- 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 initiative which is under evaluation, including for example the program management and staff, clients who directly receive the outputs delivered by the program, target groups who are intended to receive the ultimate benefit of the policy or strategy being evaluated, and those using the evaluation for decision-making.

Where the evaluation team are employed within the organisation responsible for the initiative, 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 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 research and evaluation 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) (www.eval.org) and the Canadian Evaluation Society's Guidelines for Ethical Conduct (www.evaluationcanada.ca). Relevant research guidelines include: the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research; the New Zealand Social Policy Evaluation and Research (SPEaR) Committee 2008 Good Practice Guidelines for Research and Evaluation involving Pacific People¹ (www.spear.govt.nz); and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies (www.aiatsis.gov.au).

The AES 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, such as the Australian Public Service Code of Conduct, 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, Treaty of Waitangi, Northern Territory Land Rights Act, and legislation in areas such as privacy, human rights and mandatory reporting).

Future directions

Ethical guides and codes derive from the issues we currently recognise, but also have to deal with the unforeseen dilemmas that will 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. The AES has committed to review and revise these Guidelines regularly.

1. Although these guidelines are no longer in force, they remain available and useful until new guidelines are adopted

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 (including participants) 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 positive and negative effects and implications of the evaluation for them.
- Identify limitations, different interests**
2. In responding to an evaluation brief, evaluators should explore the shortcomings and strength 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(s) and other stakeholders in the evaluation, and highlight the possible impacts of the evaluation on other stakeholders. It may be useful to refer explicitly to these Guidelines.

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. 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 with 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 practise beyond it.

Disclose potential conflicts of interest

7. In responding to a brief, evaluators should disclose any of their roles or relationships that may create potential conflicts of interest in the conduct of the evaluation. Any such conflicts 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.

Links:

Tangata Whenua, Community and Voluntary Sector Research Centre (2007) Code Of Practice for the Tangata Whenua, Community and Voluntary Sector Research Centre, Chapter 3.3, www.communityresearch.org.nz

Te Ara Tika, www.hrc.govt.nz

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 Reciprocity. Participants giving their information (taonga) to researchers should reap some benefit. For example, the findings of the evaluation should be made available and where possible presented to participants, providing information of benefit to them and their wider community.

Link: Te Ara Tika, Benefit sharing, www.hrc.govt.nz

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.

GUIDELINES

Consider implications of differences and inequalities

10. Account should be taken in the design, the conduct and the reporting of evaluations 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. Particular regard should be given to any rights, protocols, treaties, legislative or legal guidelines which apply.

Links:

Te Ara Tika, www.hrc.govt.nz

AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies, www.aiatsis.gov.au

Identify purpose and commissioners

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

Obtained 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 must be sought from parents or guardians.

Link: SPEaR Guidelines, Applying the Principles of Respect, www.spear.govt.nz

Be sufficiently rigorous 13. The evaluation should be rigorous in design, data collection and analysis to the extent required by the intended use of the evaluation. It should adhere to the highest standards of validity and reliability, appropriate to the intended use, to increase the accuracy and credibility of the information produced.

Declare limitations 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 and it is useful to include a 'limitations' section in the report when describing methodology, to make these issues clear to all readers.

Maintain confidentiality 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.

Links:

Tangata Whenua, Community and Voluntary Sector Research Centre (2007) Code Of Practice for the Tangata Whenua, Community and Voluntary Sector Research Centre, Principle 3.2., www.communityresearch.org.nz

Smith, Decolonising Methodologies, *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, Issue 17, December 2001, www.msd.govt.nz

Report significant problems

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. Where the evaluator discovers evidence of significant problems with the conduct of the evaluation by other evaluators or by the commissioner of the evaluation, this should be referred to the Board of the AES.

Anticipate serious wrongdoing

17. In areas where potential harm/duty of care concerns apply, the evaluation team, including interviewers, need training in their legal obligations and how to respond. Where evaluators discover evidence of potential criminal activity or other serious harm or wrongdoing (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 fulfil obligations under law or their professional codes of conduct, which may include reporting the discovery to the appropriate authority, maintaining any agreements made with informants regarding confidentiality unless these are superseded by legislation such as mandatory reporting of child abuse or domestic violence. These responsibilities may conflict, and also go beyond the evaluator's competence. For evaluations involving sensitive topics, at risk populations and/or marginalised groups, evaluators should anticipate the risk of such discoveries, and develop protocols for identifying and reporting them. They should refer to the protocols when obtaining informed consent from the people providing information (Guideline 12).

Anticipate trauma 18. Evaluations involving interviews or focus groups on sensitive topics such as crime, sexual violence and family dysfunction run the risk of awakening or re-awakening trauma in participants and sometimes in evaluators. Areas of potential trauma should be avoided where possible; where they must be addressed, mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure counselling and/or support for participants and evaluators is available if required. Protocols for terminating interviews if distress occurs should be built into the evaluation design.

Accountability 19. Evaluators are responsible for ensuring the quality, usability and accuracy of their findings.

Link: Canadian Evaluation Society Guidelines for Ethical Conduct, Accountability, www.evaluationcanada.ca.

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. Many if not most evaluations will have multiple audiences, and the needs of each should be taken into account.

GUIDELINES

Report clearly and simply

20. 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, and also be shaped to respect the communication styles of the stakeholders. The reciprocity principle requires that evaluation findings be made available to evaluands; relevant language, literacy and cultural communication issues should be taken into account.

Report fairly, accurately and comprehensively

21. 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. Minority perspectives and experiences should be identified and reported fairly.

Identify sources and make acknowledgements

22. 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

23. 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 reports

24. In releasing information related to the evaluation, the commissioners/users have a responsibility not to breach the integrity of the reports.