

Ethics and standards – twelve years of mixed progress

ethics & standards

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In my first year as a member, 1990-91, the AES Ethics and Standards Subcommittee considered a paper on Standards in Evaluation by Christine Martins which described the work of the Joint Committee on Standards for Education Evaluation led by Daniel Stufflebeam¹, and advocated more active exploration of the topic in the Evaluation Journal of Australasia and national evaluation conferences).

As a result of experience a few years previously in researching and developing a code of ethics for the NZ public service, I felt the approach being taken by the Subcommittee was too philosophical and academic to lead quickly to practical guidelines for practising evaluators. I therefore suggested consideration of formats ranging from a simple 'Ten Commandments' on a card, through an expanded but pithy version suitable for carrying in a wallet or purse, to a more discursive booklet with or without examples, and recommended a two-stage approach, starting simply and advancing to the more comprehensive.

For the 1991 Adelaide conference, Colin Sharp as the new Chair of the Subcommittee prepared a comprehensive paper. Colin recommended in summary that:

- AES adopt the Joint Committee Standards with some caveats;
- these be used by commissioners of evaluations and practitioners for guidance;
- AES pursue the use of draft guidelines and case studies, including overseas examples, to illustrate excellence and pitfalls;
- AES advise practitioners and users if in doubt to seek advice of other professionals to determine action which would cause least harm to those most at risk;
- AES appoint a list of experts to represent and interpret codes of ethics and standards in evaluation; and
- AES promote research to verify the appropriateness of standards and demonstrate exemplars of quality evaluation practice.

Colin's paper led to healthy debate during the conference and at the AGM. The Subcommittee was enlarged so it could make more progress with recommendations for the next AGM. It also became clear that progress would have to involve wider consultation with allied groups and clients.

The rejuvenated Subcommittee aimed to produce four products before the 1992 conference: a statement of legal requirements and implications (the responsibility of Darrel Caulley); a draft code of ethics (Ian Trotman); a set of standards for evaluation practice in Australasia (Jerome Winston); and a PR pamphlet or discussion paper (Colin Sharp). It was fortunate that in Wellington two organisations were looking at codes for their own evaluation work, so I was able to draw on their work and form a working party with Marlene Levine (Dept. of Social Welfare) and Jeanette Schollum (Education Review Office). This group reviewed the previous work, examined additional codes until around forty had been sighted, and went through a process of consultation on a number of drafts. Michael Small of WA, one of the Subcommittee, was on a sabbatical at Massey University and we were able to keep in touch easily, finally meeting in Palmerston North for revision and signoff from the working party.

An example was also prepared in a small folding format for purse or wallet. It included a preface on the code's purpose and information on the AES. This was finished for a late February teleconference where a few changes were made and some different formats tried. The draft *Interim Code of Ethics* was then circulated to participants from the previous conference and to regions, for comment before the 1992 conference in July.

Reactions from members ranged from support to questions about the timeliness and appropriateness of such an initiative for AES, given its decision to define itself as an interest group rather than attempting to push for an elite and controlled profession. The Queensland region reported on a forum of 40 participants in a two-page statement, commending progress over the last decade but questioning the maturity and expertise of the majority of members to develop and adopt a code. It also questioned whether

over the next two years. It was confirmed that the AES would continue to advocate the American Joint Committee Standards, which were currently being revised, and it was noted the AEA was also working on ethical standards. It was felt it might be best to adopt one of these codes and provide a commentary on its application to Australasian conditions.

The draft *Interim Code of Ethics* was formally adopted by the 1993 AGM. There was disappointment that the Joint Committee Standards revision had concentrated on educational use instead of being more generalised as expected. It was felt that the AES might have to produce something itself, given the level of interest and the number of requests for such information.

Little progress was made during 1993-94 whilst waiting for information from the AEA. It was noted their approach was framed for external evaluation, whereas much of ours was internal. Eventually it was agreed to move on without waiting.

In 1995, the Committee on Ethics and Standards in Evaluation recommended review of the Interim Code of Ethics in light of the published revision of the Joint Committee Standards; powers for disciplining members under the Constitution if they persistently and wilfully acted in a manner prejudicial to the interests of the Society and its code of ethics; and the impacts of collecting case studies on ethical issues.

At the international evaluation conference in Vancouver in 1995, a pre-conference workshop on the Joint Committee's 1994 revision of *The Program Evaluation Standards* was presented by its Chairman, Dr James Sanders. Colin Sharp and I, with Neville Hightett for part of the time, had a meeting with Dr Sanders to discuss the possible internationalisation of the Standards and their possible redevelopment to fit the then new ISO approach. Although interested, the Joint Committee was weary after its work in revising the Standards to apply more generally than their initial and still primary focus on education. It was also very concerned at the practicality of spanning different cultures. Dr Sanders was interested in the potential of AES producing a commentary or companion volume for our needs. He was also interested in detailed comments which would be collected for further revisions, possibly at about five-yearly intervals.

Meanwhile, at the 1995 AES conference, it was decided that efforts should be made to review the *Interim Code of Ethics* so that it could be finalised, and that more work be done on how to handle standards, using a weekend workshop. (In the event, it was not possible to organise this during the year.) Discussion raised once more the issues of whether the Code was primarily a regulatory device or a set of advisory guidelines. It was also decided to include a response form in conference satchels and a workshop session during the 1996 Wellington Conference, and to publish examples of applying standards in *Evaluation News and Comment (EN&C)*.

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there was a common core of values, and proposed that a set of standards or a statement of 'Best Practices' be developed to guide practice. It argued that a code, if developed, should reflect behaviours rather than procedures and expressed concerns at the legal ramifications, particularly in respect of expert witnesses in a court of law.

In spite of these concerns, the draft code of ethics was adopted in 1992, with a few changes, as an *Interim Code of Ethics* for trial and comment

The Ethics and Standards Committee was directed to try and progress from the *Interim Code of Ethics* by producing *Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations*, desirably with illustrative case studies. The American *Program Evaluation Standards* in their revised 1994 guise were formally recognised as being appropriate for use by AES members.

In December 1996 the Committee on Ethics and Standards in Evaluation held a weekend retreat in Melbourne to address the need of advancing the *Interim Code of Ethics* by something shorter and tighter, which if possible linked to standards and included examples. This intense weekend, under the chair of Ros Volpato and assisted by a contracted researcher, made excellent progress in developing a 24-step *Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations* with each step illustrated by a very brief pithy illustrative example. It was seen as complementary to the Joint Committee Standards, and covered both principles and procedures.

By 1997–98, the Committee had become an Ethics Taskforce, and had an extremely busy year now under the leadership of Chris Milne. At the start it published the *Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations*, excluding the illustrative examples, in the AES corporate format and distributed copies centrally to the federal Australian and New Zealand governments, drawing a number of positive comments. It was left for regions to distribute copies to state and local governments. A regular feature on ethical examples was initiated in *EN&C*. Later a weekend workshop in Sydney tackled a review of the *Interim Code of Ethics* by looking again at specifications and preparing a comparative table of expected professional behaviour, statements from the *Interim Code and Guidelines*, and the new values and guidelines statement for Board decisions. It concluded that the Society would need to consider the implications of sanctions for behaviour which seriously offended expectations, and that acceptance of and adherence to a code must be a condition of membership. This led to a revised draft *Code of Ethics* in a much simpler style than before and a draft policy on its implementation. A disciplinary process involving a special investigative group, including an independent member from a related professional organisation, was proposed. The Board approved the package for circulation and comment prior to its Melbourne meeting. Late in 2000, Chris Milne finalised and gained endorsement for the revised *Code of Ethics*, which was published, and for the associated policy on its operation.

A meeting of AES members at the Geelong conference in 2000 led to re-activation of work on Standards over 2000-01 by a small committee led by Doug Fraser. This work built on a paper prepared by him and Jerome Winston with help from Patricia Rogers, who presented it at the Perth Conference in 1999. This paper had developed a series of standards for application in Australasia, and took the approach of following through the stages of managing an evaluation. It is a very good paper

and hopefully will be available on the AES website.. Over a period of about eighteen months this group spent time discussing and debating whether such an approach was the best to use, or whether the structure of the document should be based on a series of principles or underpinning concepts such as the four used in the Joint Committee Standards and, if the latter, what should they be.

Unfortunately, because of the work commitments of most of the committee members, activity was rather spasmodic. I think the majority believed some linkage to the American *Program Evaluation Standards* would be useful and some underpinning principles would provide a firm foundation. But none emerged which gained quick or strong support, and there was some concern that the simplicity and practicality of the Perth paper was in

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danger of being lost. The work was pulled together for a workshop at the Canberra Conference in 2001 in a matrix which compared the Perth suggestions against the American *Program Evaluation Standard* main concepts, which were slightly modified to better suit the use of language in this part of the world, and also to show linkages with the *Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations*.

The workshop was unable to give a clear guidance on preferences, or on the alternatives of whether a local version of the standards or some form of commentary to be used with the American *Program Evaluation Standard* should be developed. Heavy demands from a new job and his important work in editing the new Journal meant Doug had to give up as convenor and nobody else at present has volunteered to re-activate the project. A complementary initiative to develop a set of competencies for evaluators in Australasia has been undertaken, initially led by Sue Funnell and then picked by Brian English as chair of the Professional Development and Training Committee, but this is a topic for a separate paper. Meantime the Perth paper is a useful guide for evaluators from the Antipodes, although it carries no AES endorsement.

Note this is a companion paper to Trotman's *Reflections on a decade in the life of the Australasian Evaluation Society – 1990-1999* which excludes information on ethics and standards.

Footnote

- 1 *Standards for Evaluations of Educational Programs, Projects and Materials*, Stufflebeam (Ed), Sage 1981