

Evaluation in Australasia: An Overview of Recent Developments

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The Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) concluded its fourth international conference October 10-12, 2005 held in Brisbane, Australia. The two-and-a-half day program included a variety of topics covering evaluation theory, methods and trends, uses of evaluation, values and ethics, and evaluation stories. Within these strands, the greatest amount of attention was given to capacity building and ethics in practice. Evaluation capacity building was presented in three different scenarios: 1) self-assessment tools, 2) health program evaluation and development, and 3) organizational development using internal program evaluators.

Ethics in evaluation were considered primarily from the evaluator's perspective as compared to using ethics to determine values needed to arrive at evaluative conclusions. In his presentation on ethics in evaluation, David Turner, Manager, Evaluation, Labor Market Policy Group, Department of Labor, New Zealand, presented the results from his study designed to capture practitioner approaches to ethics in different evaluation societies (Australasian Evaluation Society, American Evaluation Association (AEA), and the Canadian Evaluation Society). Turner

found similarities between respondents' perspectives towards evaluation using appropriate data collection and analysis, community respect and cultural competence, and ethics that include the evaluator do no harm, guarantee rights to privacy, self determination, and information ownership. The main difference was found between AES and AEA respondents with respect to the perception that AEA respondents felt more strongly than AES respondents that the decision to conduct an evaluation according to standards rests with the evaluator.

Various evaluation approaches were also presented at the conference including empowerment, participatory, realistic, and appreciative inquiry. While two presentations specifically addressed personnel evaluation, the others were primarily considering program evaluations. The keynote speakers included Valerie Caracelli from the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), Phillip Adams, an Australian social commentator, columnist, and radio presenter, John Owen and Sue Funnel, both AES Fellows.

In addition to Caracelli's keynote presentation, she conducted one of 16 pre-conference workshops titled "Mixed Methods in Evaluation Research: Illuminating Contextual Complexity." The intent of the session was to help participants understand how to use mixed methods in practice to strengthen the quality of evaluation studies. Other workshops that stood out from commonly presented topics included one covering risk management and audit as evaluative tools presented by Graham Smith, and another introducing the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique where monitoring is conducted without indicators. This workshop highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of MSC and illustrated how MSC complements other evaluation tools. This workshop was conducted by Jessica Dart, a partner at Clear Horizon and independent consultant. An electronic

version of “A User Guide for the Most Significant Change Technique” written by Jessica Dart and Rick Davies (in press) is available from the website <http://www.clearhorizons.com.au>.

The AES has uploaded links to approximately one-half of the presentations made at the Brisbane conference. The links and titles to other papers can be found at <http://www.aes.asn.au/conference/2005/index.htm>. The 2006 AES International Conference will take place in Darwin, Australia from September 4 – 7, 2006. The theme of the 2006 conference is “Evaluation in Emerging Areas” and includes multidisciplinary, indigenous and international development approaches to evaluation, tourism, arts and culture, land management, health, and natural resource management among others.

Growth in AES Membership

Since April 2005 the AES membership has added 100 persons to its roster. Each member is assigned to one of eight regional branches of AES. Queensland and Canberra branches recorded the highest number of new members with 21 and 20 respectively. The total membership of AES is now more than 700 evaluators including practitioners, managers, teachers and students from all levels of government, universities, research agencies, community organizations, and businesses. The consistent growth of AES demonstrates the growing interest in evaluation and its growing importance in Australasia.

Evaluation Workshops Continue in 2006

Dr. John Owen conducted a series of pilot workshops on policy development and evaluation in various regions during 2005. The workshops run in the regions have

grown in recent years in both number and attendance, and the pilot workshop series conducted by Dr. Owen were reported to be quite successful, being delivered in six regions and attracting 20-25 attendees per workshop. It is expected AES will continue offering these workshops throughout 2006. Dates and times of upcoming workshops are available from the AES website (<http://www.aes.asn.au>).

Research Funding – New Zealand Families Commission

The New Zealand Families Commission is accepting proposals for the Blue Skies Fund. The Fund is designed to create opportunities for new research that promotes innovative ideas and approaches on matters relating to the interests of New Zealand families. Successful applicants will be provided up to A\$10,000 to produce a written paper or report of a standard suitable for publication by the Families Commission. For more information about the Blue Skies fund, contact Helen McNaught at Helen.McNaught@familiescommission.govt.nz.

Evaluation Journal of Australasia

According to the AES, the *Evaluation Journal of Australasia* (EJA) was not published in 2004 due to several organizational difficulties. New editors were assigned to the journal in 2005 – Drs. Rosalind Hurworth and Delwyn Goodrick – and three issues were to be published in 2005. However, only two issues of EJA were published in 2005. As of the writing date of this article, the 2005 issues of EJA had not been posted online, but the editor did offer to send the print copies on request. These issues will be reviewed in the next update for Australasia published in JMDE.



Contributor's Note

If you have additional information or corrections regarding any of the above mentioned items or if you would like to send contributions regarding evaluation activities in Australasia, please feel free to contact me at wes.martz@wmich.edu.