

# AES Professionalisation project background paper

## 1. Introduction

In 2025, the AES Board established a Professionalisation Project to examine how the evaluation profession and professionalisation landscape have evolved since 2017, identify contemporary options for the AES, and explore the role the Society could play in supporting the development, recognition and advancement of evaluation practice in Australia.

This background paper provides an overview of the project and its context. It outlines the background to professionalisation within the AES, the Board's guiding principles and non-negotiables, and emerging findings.

## 2. Background and context

*What is Professionalisation?*

Professionalisation refers to the process through which an occupation becomes recognised as a profession (e.g. Project Management). It commonly involves establishing a bounded set of knowledge, skills, and practice, shared standards, ethical expectations and forms of professional recognition that support capability, credibility and professional identity.

Professional associations play a central role in this process through professional development, standards setting, communities of practice and, in some cases, professional recognition or credentialling programs.

*Why is the AES Exploring Professionalisation?*

As evaluation becomes increasingly central to decision-making, learning and accountability across government, philanthropy, community and First Nations contexts, there is growing interest in how evaluator capability can be developed and recognised. Given the diversity of evaluator backgrounds, training and experience, the AES has an opportunity to explore whether professionalisation could provide greater clarity, consistency and confidence in evaluation practice.

The AES has been considering the issue of professionalisation for many years, including through a 2017 discussion paper by Greet Peersman and Patricia Rogers titled ["Pathways to advance professionalisation within the context of the AES"](#). This work highlighted opportunities to strengthen evaluation quality, identity and pathways, alongside risks of exclusion or over-formalisation. It recommended a focus on strengthening, connecting and augmenting existing activities as the immediate priority, with voluntary credentialling to be considered later, and not to pursue a regulated or licensed profession.

### *Alignment with the current 2024 to 2028 AES Strategic Plan*

The Professionalisation Project supports the AES Strategic Plan's focus on strengthening professional identity and career pathways through professionalisation. The Strategic Plan also centres First Nations perspectives and cultural safety. It commits AES to:

- supporting First Nations evaluators and communities of practice
- promoting knowledge exchange between Indigenous and mainstream approaches
- embedding culturally safe and ethical evaluation practice

Together, these priorities highlight that professionalisation must be both developmental and culturally grounded, not solely technical.

### **3. Guiding principles**

As part of its consideration of professionalisation, the AES Board endorsed a set of guiding principles and non-negotiables in November 2025. These parameters have guided the project team's work so far and will serve as the basis against which potential models will be assessed.

Principles:

- Diverse practice recognition
- First Nations inclusion and cultural safety
- Equitable Access
- Transparency and Support
- Proportionality

### **4. Emerging findings: Professional pathways for the AES**

The project reviewed a substantial body of academic and grey literature relating to professionalisation, credentialling and professional associations. Across the professions examined, there was no single model of professionalisation. Instead, professionalisation exists along a continuum (Figure 1), ranging from informal capability-building and professional identity formation through to voluntary recognition, credentialling and, in some professions, formal regulation or licensing.



Figure 1: continuum of professionalisation

A consistent finding from the literature was that professionalisation is not synonymous with licensing or certification. Rather, professions typically develop through a combination of professional learning, competency development, communities of practice, professional recognition and, in some cases, credentialling.

Since 2013, the AES has invested primarily in the earlier stages of this continuum through the development of evaluator competencies and a coordinated professional learning program. Consistent with both the literature and previous AES recommendations, the project explored whether the next stage in this evolution should include voluntary professional recognition and credentialling approaches, while maintaining the Society's commitment to inclusivity and the diversity of evaluation practice.

The literature identified professional learning as the most widely adopted and effective foundation for professionalisation. Across professions, associations support capability development through training, mentoring, networking, conferences, communities of practice and continuing professional development. For AES, there is an opportunity to further strengthen and articulate these pathways through the existing competency framework, professional learning program and mentoring initiatives.

Many professional associations complement professional learning with voluntary recognition mechanisms to acknowledge expertise, commitment to professional standards and ongoing development. Some have also introduced voluntary credentialling or certification programs, which provide more formal recognition of competence through assessment of experience, capabilities and professional development. While these approaches can strengthen professional identity and provide assurance to employers and commissioners, they require governance and administrative investment, and evidence of their direct impact on professional practice is limited.

The review also identified emerging interest in flexible recognition approaches such as digital badges and micro-credentials, which can provide targeted recognition of specific skills and learning achievements.

Indigenous and non-Western perspectives highlighted the importance of relationships, cultural legitimacy, community accountability and multiple ways of knowing and demonstrating capability. These perspectives reinforce the need for any AES approach to be inclusive and culturally grounded, with cultural safety embedded throughout. This includes meaningful First Nations involvement in the development and operationalisation of professionalisation, alongside the involvement of practitioners from the diverse contexts in which evaluation is practised.