

Canadian Evaluation Society  
National Council

Response to Proposed

*Action Plan for the Canadian Evaluation Society with  
Respect to Professional Standards for Evaluators*

March 8, 2007

## **Background**

On May 19, 2006 the Canadian Evaluation Society, National Council issued a request for proposals (RFP) titled 'Fact Finding Regarding Evaluator Credentialing'. The purpose of the RFP was to attract proposals to produce an action plan that would aid the Canadian Evaluation Society (CES) in establishing a professional credentialing system including a member registry. The term professional credentialing system was meant to connote a mechanism or means of determining whether an applicant's educational or practical experiences and achievements warrant the award of a professional credential (Altschuld, 2005). The action plan would be based on fact-finding research including reviews or consultation of professional practice organizations that currently operate credentialing systems. The action plan would identify specific benefits and risks of credentialing and provide options for consideration by CES.

CES National Council initiated the RFP process in response to increasing interest and attention to issues of quality assurance and the prospect of developing professional designation from CES members and from individual and institutional members of the Canadian evaluation community. A comprehensive Canadian national survey conducted by leading evaluation practitioners revealed significant interest in professionalization and certification among contemporary evaluation practitioners (Borys, Gauthier, Kishchuk & Roy, 2005; Gauthier, Borys, Kishchuk & Roy, in press). Such interest extends well beyond the professional field. For example, in government, particularly at the federal level, there has been increasing concern about evaluation quality assurance and the need for professionalization of evaluation, as conveyed in a series of inquiries sponsored by the Centre of Excellence for Evaluation, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (e.g., Breem & associates, 2005; Cousins & Aubry, 2006; Gusman, 2005).

Given this increasing interest Council resolved to initiate a fact-finding inquiry in order to lay the groundwork for intensive debate on the matter within the membership. Only after consultation with the CES membership would a decision be made as to whether a system for professional designation should be installed in Canada and if so, what that system might look like. Council specifically asked for a report on a credentialing system because it was of the view that it may be premature to develop a full-blown professional certification structure at this juncture and that a credentialing

mechanism might represent a positive and significant first step toward longer term systems of professional designation within the evaluation community.

Council was very fortunate to have received competitive interest and proposals in response to the RFP and ultimately the contract was awarded to a consortium of prominent and leading members of the Canadian evaluation community headed by Gerald Halpern (henceforth referred to as the Consortium). The proposal included a clear indication that the bulk of the work would be contributed *pro bono* and that the resources designated to the project would be deployed to research assistants and to foster communication among Consortium members. Council is extremely grateful for the generosity and dedication shown by the Consortium members in the interests of CES and evaluation in Canada.

Before the contract was signed in summer 2006, significant negotiations took place regarding the specific focus of the fact-finding project. The Consortium argued that it is pivotal at this juncture to situate professional credentialing within a proposal for action for a full-blown system of professional designation including professional certification. Ultimately, it was jointly agreed that the focus for the fact-finding document would be on credentialing but that this professional designation would be placed within a larger scheme of professional designation including professional certification of evaluators.

Council is very pleased to have worked with the Consortium in its development of the products of this inquiry, now available for public scrutiny. The Consortium clearly contributed above and beyond the parameters of the signed contract in delivering a tripartite collection of products comprised of (1) an action plan for professional standards for evaluators and two support documents: (2) an extensive and comprehensive literature review and (3) a research report on a qualitative survey of 15 professional organizations and societies based on document (website) analysis and key informant interviews. Each of these components was very carefully crafted and responsive to Council feedback on preliminary drafts. The CES membership and the Canadian evaluation community will undoubtedly benefit from the contributions made by this dedicated and prominent group of colleagues.

It is important to note that, in the end, not all Consortium members agreed fully with the final product. Specifically, one Consortium member, Mr. Bud Long, filed a 'minority report' with CES National Council (Long, 2007). Council welcomes the opinions expressed by Mr. Long in this document and is of the view that such opinions ought to be given due consideration.

## **Proposed Action**

The centerpiece of the tripartite submission is the Action Plan. In that document, the Consortium makes it clear that the Action Plan is based largely on the two supporting documents but that its basis extends beyond those pillars to draw from the experience of Consortium members captured through dialogue and exchange and from the results of the survey of Canadian evaluators mentioned above (Borys et al., 2005; Gauthier et al., in press). The Action Plan calls for the development and installation of a three-tier system of professional designation consisting of formalized designation of:

1. **CES member** including subscription to CES objectives, evaluation standards and ethical guidelines,
2. **Credentialed Evaluator (CE)** or entry level designation awarded to members having applied for the designation after having successfully completed an accredited program or its equivalent and
3. **Certified Professional Evaluator (CPE)**, professional designation awarded to members who meet all of the prescribed requirements (letters of support in a transitional period; successful completion of standardized examinations to test core knowledge competencies in the longer term).

The report recommends that anyone completing an application form for membership to CES would voluntarily accept CES objectives, evaluation standards and ethical guidelines, but that the award of higher levels of designation would be through application only. For both CE and CPE designations, the Consortium recommends that respective oversight boards be established. In the case of CE, an *Accreditation Board* (CES-ABd) would assume responsibility for accrediting programs of study and equivalencies. In the case of CPE a *Board of Examiners* (CES-BdE) would manage the CPE designation process. The report recommends immediate action and the

establishment of interim designation procedures such that a grand-parenting system would not be required; existing CES members could apply for and achieve designations for which they are eligible.

The concluding recommendations of the Consortium propose that the CES establish a publicly accessible directory of members with their level of professional designation and that CES should advocate on behalf of the value and benefits of professional designation and the unique competencies of those of its members who have been awarded a professional designation.

The Consortium stipulated that the recommendations are presented in the sequence in which they may be adopted and that should one level not be adopted then recommendations with that level and any of the subsequent levels would not require further consideration.

## **CES National Council Response**

National Council met on Feb 23 and 24, 2007 in a special session to review the Consortium Plan of Action and to develop a response. Council concluded that the Consortium's recommendations are very thorough and well developed and, without question, should be given careful consideration. Such consideration should be given in the context of a review of the assumptions and evidence that underlie the recommendations, as reflected in the Action Plan and its supporting documents. Among the important assumptions for the multi-tier system of professional designations are at least the following:

- That sufficient impetus and justification for system development and installation exists;
- That ample training and professional development exists or will exist;
- That an adequate foundational knowledge base for the profession exists or will exist;
- That set up costs and ongoing maintenance costs would not be prohibitive.

We now turn to an examination of these underlying assumptions and Council's position on them.

*Impetus and Justification*

Professional designation in evaluation is a topic that has been extensively debated in Canada and elsewhere. In Canada there is little question that interest in professional designation has intensified of late and that the time has come to seriously consider action in this regard. It is in response to this interest that CES National Council initiated the RFP process for a fact finding inquiry. In the words of the Consortium “Our work on this Action Plan has made us aware of the need for CES to proceed with measured haste to retain control of this agenda” (see, Action Plan, Foreword, paragraph 3) and “There is a strong rationale for proposing three successive levels of professional designation.” (see Executive Summary, first page, paragraph 6).

While CES Council is sympathetic to the view that the time has come for action on professionalization in evaluation, it remains sceptical to the prospect of a full blown system of professional designation at this time. Many of the Consortium’s arguments in favour of such a system (e.g., improved supply and quality of trained professionals, improved quality of work, greater demand for services) it is believed by Council, apply equally to the less ambitious professional designation of Credentialed Evaluator. In short, Council is not fully persuaded by the Consortium’s case favouring the more ambitious Certified Professional Evaluator. As part of their rationale the Consortium suggested that the dominant view as to why a system of professional designation has not been adopted by the American Evaluation Association (AEA) is that “university academics (who form a significant portion of the AEA membership) reject such labels” (p. 4). Council considers this claim to be somewhat of an oversimplification<sup>1</sup> but concurs that the Canadian evaluation community, as reflected by CES membership, is more extensively represented by a practice base, and that the context in our country is comparatively favourable to some sort of system of professional designation.

*Training and Professional Development*

Council has concerns about whether there exists or will exist in the foreseeable future an adequate base for advanced evaluator training that would be accessible to

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Worthen (2003) for a review of the complexities that a system of professional designation would imply.

evaluators across the country. An extensive survey by Cousins and Aubry (2006) shows that compared to other jurisdictions, including especially the United States, there currently exists a paucity of designated university-based training programs in program evaluation. Graduate degree programs in program evaluation are virtually non-existent, although it is most certainly possible at most universities to specialize in evaluation under the auspices of some related disciplinary focus (e.g., applied psychology, educational administration, public administration). That being said, the Consortium acknowledges the recent development of several university-based graduate certificate programs in evaluation (typically one-half master's degree). It is also clear that Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS) is sensitive to and supportive of this trend. Recently TBS initiated discussions among a number of universities across the country about the prospect of developing accessible programs of this sort. With CES membership hovering around 2,000, it seems likely that significant development in university-based programs would be required to fill the educational demands of a system of professional designation. Nevertheless, Council is encouraged by the current trends and by the availability of graduate courses (if not programs) available at universities across the country (see CES website for details).

On another note, CES Council observes that many opportunities for introductory level training in evaluation continue to be available on an ongoing basis. Several programs, courses, workshops and professional development opportunities are offered across the country on a routine basis. Not the least of these, would be CES Essential Skills Series (ESS) programs and intermediate level courses in evaluation-related topics (e.g., survey methods, program logic models). Workshops and professional development experiences are routinely offered at national and chapter level conferences. Council is of the view that there would be a role for such educational experiences in an action plan for professional designation and that this dimension seems to have been somewhat underplayed by the Consortium.

### *Knowledge Base and Competencies*

The Consortium's analysis of the literature and the experiences of other professional societies and organizations show that a well-structured and agreed

knowledge base is essential to any system of professional designation and that a knowledge base of any professional group evolves over time. The Consortium acknowledges that considerable work in evaluation has been done in this regard and points to the development of the Core Body of Knowledge (see, e.g., Zorzi, Perrin, McGuire, Long & Lee, 2002), a project sponsored by CES, as a case in point. Other projects in this domain were also identified by the Consortium: see, for example, the thematic segment on the topic appearing in a 2005 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation* (vol. 20, no. 2). Council concurs that excellent work has been done in this important area but questions whether the knowledge base is sufficiently well developed to justify its foundational role in a system of professional designation. Some have argued that the diversification of the field within the past 20 years has been a significant impediment to the justification for professional certification (e.g., Worthen, 2003). Is the knowledge base sufficiently comprehensive to respect such diversification? Many would argue that it is not. One such argument comes from the Minority Report filed by Long (2007). His argument is that the current state of the knowledge base falls well short of what would be needed and that significant resources need to be invested to redress this gap before any system of professional designation can be installed. Long argues for a system of professional designations that would include a basic certification based on core competencies and advanced specializations with unique knowledge bases underlying them.

Council is favourably disposed to the suggestion of Stevahn, King, Ghre and Minnema (2005) that it would be possible to build on what we know as a basis for ongoing professional development. They propose undertaking a “cross-walk” (cross-referencing with the goal of determine points of overlap and difference) of different extant knowledge bases in order to develop a comprehensive list of evaluator competencies. The product of this exercise would be valuable as foundational knowledge for professional development and training (Stevahn et al., 2005). Council remains cautiously optimistic that such a product may form, subject to validation, the basis for a system of evaluator credentialing, that is, deciding appropriate training and equivalencies. Given the enormous diversity in the field, Council has reservations about such a list being a sufficient foundation for individual certification through formal testing. Not all would

agree, however. Long (2007) argues that a knowledge base that would be suitable as a basis for certification examination can and should be developed and that this should be the highest priority at present. He suggests that this goal may be achieved in relatively short order, over a period of a few years. Given the diversity of the field, Council remains skeptical with regard to this prospect.

#### *Costs of Development and Ongoing Maintenance*

The Consortium makes it clear in the Action Plan that there will be significant costs associated with the development of a multi-tier system of professional designation. Yet based on their interpretation of the experiences of other professional organizations, such costs ought not to be viewed as an impediment. They make the claim that costs can be significantly offset by *pro bono* participation in the development and installation of a system of professional designation, including the development and validation of certification examinations. The costs would also be offset by fees charged to members who wish to apply for and maintain professional designations. The Consortium also referenced their finding that none of the organizations they had surveyed had experienced much in the way of challenges arising from legal issues, yet the ‘threat of litigation’ was identified by Worthen (2003) as being a serious impediment to the development of professional designations in the United States. It was acknowledged that the legal costs of even one challenge could be devastating for a professional society. Comparatively, the designation CE would be less litigious than CPE given that it is based on a peer review rather than individual testing mechanism.

Council concurs that considerable costs for professional designation could be offset through *pro bono* contribution by esteemed members of the Society yet significant costs will remain and would need to be borne out by members or partners in the development of the professional designation system. For example, the installation of certification examinations may pose serious potential risks to a system of certification and Council therefore believes that their development and validation would need to be undertaken by disinterested third party measurement practitioner specialists. Furthermore, regardless of whether a system of certification or credentialing is installed, there would exist a need to hire dedicated staff to manage and coordinate the system

including receiving and processing applications, managing application review and adjudication processes and maintaining an up-to-date and accurate public registry of members along with their appropriate professional designation.

## **CES National Council's Opinion at this Juncture**

Given the foregoing discussion and analysis CES National Council is inclined to give serious consideration to the option of developing a system for evaluator credentialing at this time. Council is less attracted to the notion of professional certification but would not rule out this professional designation as a longer term possibility. It should be understood that no such action with regard to setting up any professional designation would be undertaken without extensive consultation with and support from the CES membership and partners and that any subsequent action taken would be guided by principles of cost-effectiveness. Of particular concern and interest would be respect for regional and mobility needs and contextual considerations as well as input from partners, particularly evaluation employers, within the Canadian evaluation community. This response paper concludes with the essential elements of CES National Council's position at this juncture.

1. Council accepts that a system of professional designation should be developed and implemented and that work on such a system should begin in the near term. Council believes that such a system should take the form of a credentialing system based on member educational and practical experiences. Council further believes that pursuing the development of a professional designation of this sort will leave open the possibility to develop and implement an exam-based system of professional certification in the future, should a decision to do so be made.
2. Council would see as a pivotal first step the undertaking of a cross-walk or cross-referencing of existing professional evaluation knowledge frameworks as a basis for deciding criteria that would underlie a system of professional credentialing.
3. Council accepts the Consortium's suggestion for the establishment of formalized membership that would include verifiable acceptance (e.g., signed statement) by a

prospective member of CES professional objectives, evaluation standards and ethical principles.

4. Council agrees that a CES *Credentialing Board* (CES-CB) should be established to oversee the development of criteria and ultimately to decide the admissibility of individual applicants as Credentialed Evaluators (CE). The CES-CB would not be responsible for accrediting professional development or training programs but it would develop criteria on the basis of programs offered and what graduates of such programs could reasonably be expected to know and do.

The CES-CB would be mandated in the near term to develop and implement the CE system. It would be further mandated to work with universities and other educational service providers to encourage the development of evaluator training and educational programs that would be suitable and accessible to CES members across the country. In the longer term, the CES-CB would be mandated to oversee decisions concerning admissibility of individual applicants as CEs.

The CES-CB would be accountable to National Council. A mechanism for establishing the CES-CB would be developed by National Council, subject to input from the membership and partners. Council concurs with the Consortium's suggestion of potential sources for members for the Board, specifically:

- Fellows of CES,
- Recipients of the CES Award for "Contribution to Evaluation in Canada"
- Recipients of the CES Award for "Service to the Canadian Evaluation Society"

Council also recognizes that regional considerations should factor into the mechanism for establishing the CES-CB.

5. Council recommends that a designation CE would be awarded to persons who apply who have sufficient practical experience in evaluation (to be determined by the CES-CB) and/or who successfully complete as a minimum designated university-based certificate, diploma or degree programs (e.g., graduate certificate in program evaluation or equivalent). Council would argue that if a benchmark for credentialing were set, for example, at the level of graduate (one-half master's degree) in program evaluation the knowledge and skill development of persons achieving this goal would

be superior to “entry level”. In this respect, Council disagrees with the view of the Consortium.

6. Council believes that a ‘grandparenting’ provision should be installed for a transitional period. The CES-CB would be mandated to develop criteria for deciding who gets ‘grandparented’, how long such a privilege is extended to the practice community and what evidence is required to be granted a credential in this way. For example, existing members who are working in evaluation could, through some sort of letter of attestation, be granted CE status. All new members would be required to apply for and achieve any professional designation higher than member.
7. Council believes that a public registry that includes member’s professional designation should be installed and maintained and that the registry should be publicly accessible on the CES website.
8. Council believes that dedicated staff should be hired to manage and administer the professional designation system but that every effort should be made to offset other costs of developing and managing the system through pro bono work, partnership development and other in-kind contributions. Council believes that members holding CE designation should pay an annual maintenance fee and that the fee should be kept to a minimum.
9. Council believes that CEs should demonstrate evidence of ongoing professional development (to be decided by CES-CB) that might include regular evaluation practice. CE designations may be withdrawn for such reasons as professional misconduct under criteria to be established by the CES-CB.
10. Finally, Council believes that a dispute mechanism should be developed by National Council and that this mechanism would rule on disputes or appeals to CES-CB regarding admissibility and withdrawal decisions.

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