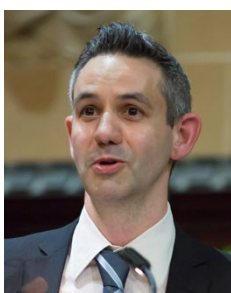



Who or what is the 'fit-for-purpose' emergency management practitioner of the 21st century?



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Australia is regularly affected by high-risk hazards and disasters of various types, each having myriad consequences for people, homes, places, businesses, communities and environments. As elsewhere, 80% of 'declared disasters' are hydrometeorological, that is, weather and climate related. To prepare for a more dynamic climate as well as other societal risks will demand more from people tasked with the responsibility of emergency management, including preparedness and response.

Disasters remind us of the importance of emergency management as a *process* and the practitioner as a *professional* who sits at a critical intersection of the people, governments, the private sector, the emergency management sector as well as a variety of stakeholders. A great deal is asked of emergency management practitioners and those demands will increase, colliding with a more complex world, dwindling paid and volunteer workforces as well as increasingly resource-constrained settings.

Others have said, and I repeat, that it is important to examine who or what will the emergency management practitioner of the future be? What qualifications, training, skills, competences, knowledge and other abilities would we expect of a contemporary emergency management practitioner, be they paid, volunteer, full or part time, in an official emergency response agency or as a member of a corporation, business or organisation of any other type?

My opinion is that, too often after disaster occurs, discussion flares up in the media, within affected communities, on social media and on platforms such as LinkedIn, after the disaster and following the release of public enquiry and commission reports. Repeatedly, misinformed, unprofessional and perhaps even insulting discussion is aired on various media platforms – something I feel is unhelpful. However, the underlying questions are good ones and worthy of debate.

To contribute, bring some structure and order and to act as a call to action for others to contribute to this debate, I have summarised my thinking on some of the key questions that should be explored, researched and examined further. This is a starting, not a finishing point.

The question of 'who or what is the fit-for-purpose emergency management practitioner' repeatedly emerges and the recurrence of this question belies its clear importance. We cannot hide from exploring, articulating, and demanding the skills and abilities of emergency management practitioners if we are to mitigate future disaster risks. It also shows that many stakeholders think we do not presently have the right balance.

In Australia, I accept that the emergency management sector (as broadly conceived within the 'Profiling Australia's Vulnerability: the interconnected causes and cascading effects of systemic disaster'¹ report) defines who or what an emergency management practitioner is – not me. An emergency management practitioner may be a local government official; a paid employee of a corporation or utility; a business continuity manager; an employee of a private sector company; a command officer of a local, regional, or state level emergency management agency; a volunteer in any organisation (e.g. the NSW Rural Fire Service, a non-government organisation, a community support network) and so forth. They

may be employed full-time, part-time or be volunteer. They may or may not concurrently hold another paid role such as town planner and emergency management practitioner, or they may be as already said, a volunteer in any sort of organisation aimed at the wider process of disaster risk reduction. I resist a specific definition because different sectors, organisations, agencies, communities and places need flexible ways of defining and running 'emergency management' (and thus, determining who or what an 'emergency management practitioner' is) and they are best placed to that. Therein is the first question to address – who or what do we consider an emergency management practitioner to be and who gets to decide?

I think there are basic questions that serve as a useful starting point for society to ask and address, to ensure we have a fit-for-purpose emergency management practitioner for the challenges ahead:

- What initial qualifications, training, skills and competencies and experiences should an emergency management practitioner have?
- What ongoing professional development training activities should they engage in, how often, for what purpose, should they be and certified and if so, by whom?
- Is there, or should there be, a clear role and career progression structure – a ladder of emergency management practitioner development so to speak, that individuals may climb to gain more skills, training and experience as they need and desire?
- Should there be a national accreditation agency with appropriate, regularly reviewed benchmarks and standards (and if so, by whom)? Related to this, should there be a consistent national qualifications framework that scaffolds from simple, on-the-ground response functions up to strategic, national command and coordination capabilities – recognised and transferable between sectors (e.g. the official, governmental emergency management sector, the private sector)?
- What do the position descriptions of advertised jobs for emergency management practitioners say the incumbent ought to be like in terms of qualifications, training, skills, experience, and competence and how should these mirror the requirements of 'places and sectors' where those emergency management practitioners will work?
- How should we determine whether the role requirements meet the specific disaster risk reduction requirements for a place, sector, organisation or business?
- How do we build a flexible national emergency management workforce that is capable of deployment from one emergency context/event to another and between states and territories to build common skills and knowledge rather than to support separate fire, storm, flood agencies in each state and territory (towards a nationally flexible, economy-of-scale workforce)? Related to this, how do we ask more of emergency management practitioners with less in financially constrained environments?
- How should we support emergency management practitioners, equip and fund them to do their valuable work?

I am not the first person to ask these questions. Extremely helpful information that serves as a starting point to address these questions (and others) can be found in the work of Dippy (2022)², Ellis (2020)³, Mciver (2022)⁴, NSW Government (2020)⁵, Parsons (2020)⁶, Woodman, Bearman and Hayes (2021)⁷, Young and Jones (2019)⁸ and Zsombok (2019)⁹.

Endnotes

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