

Professionalism: the Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset

Peer reviewed

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Introduction

Emergency events are a part of life and affect communities on an ongoing basis. For example, the Major Incidents Report (AIDR 2017, p.3) recorded 9 major incidents in 2016–17 but in the 2024–25 report that number had risen to 40 (AIDR 2025, p.1). This increasing number of emergency events affects individuals, communities and the environment in diverse ways. Thus, emergency managers, response managers and recovery managers must have the knowledge, skills and abilities required to ameliorate the effects of these events.

Emergency management in Australia is undergoing a process of professionalisation (Dippy 2022, p.72). Professionalisation of emergency management requires a range of activities to be undertaken including the building of extensive theoretical knowledge and legitimate expertise, application of a code of ethics, possession of an altruistic commitment to service and application of a level of autonomy (Peterson 1976, p.573; Yam 2004, p.979). Certification, education and training previously explored by Dippy (2020 p.56; 2022 p.68) form part of this process of professionalisation in Australia. This paper brings together aspects of previous work on professionalisation and proposes development of the Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset. The dataset is a framework to capture and record emergency event data in a form that can be used in future research and builds the body of knowledge required for professionalisation of emergency management in Australia.

Background

The research undertaken for this dataset development aimed to determine the human capacities of the emergency manager in Australia. In obtaining data for this research, a list of emergency events was required. From this list, inquiry reports were retrieved

Abstract

The professionalisation of emergency management in Australia is ongoing. Supporting that process is the development of a body of knowledge to support the new profession. The body of knowledge for emergency management requires that emergency events are recorded in a manner and format that supports ongoing learning and research. There is currently no agreed format or standard for the recording of emergency events in Australia. Emerging from research into the human capacities of an emergency manager in Australia is the concept of a minimum dataset that supports building the body of knowledge and supports future research. The Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset is proposed as a means of standardising the collection of data related to emergency events that occur in Australia. A standardised collection of data will allow for practitioners and researchers to identify and learn from past events and will support the professionalisation of emergency management practice.

(where possible) to allow analysis and to identify human capacities. During this collation of research data, the issue of emergency management event data standards arose. In short, there was no standard for the collection, collation and reporting of emergency events across Australia. The lack of a standard for data has been noted in other sectors and emergency management is not considered unique in this gap.

Emergency event data were located in a broad range of sources including academic and industry websites and published research. The information located was collated and examined to determine which emergency events would form the initial dataset for the research. The databases selected include Australian and international sources as there was no recognised Australian authoritative dataset. Each dataset was found to be unique with data fields designed to meet the needs of the owner. There was not a dataset available that met the professionalisation needs of emergency management. The databases identified were:

- Asian Disaster Reduction Centre (Asian Disaster Reduction Centre 2018)
- Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub (AIDR 2018)
- Insurance Council of Australia (Insurance Council of Australia 2018)
- Major Post-event Inquiries and Reviews: Review of Recommendations (Cole et al. 2017)
- The International Disaster Database (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters 2019).

During analysis of the data, it was found there was duplication of events across databases and details of each event collected were unique based on the original purpose of the source database.

This paper presents the Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset that emerged upon completion of the analysis. The Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset brings together the range of concepts and definitions that emerged from the analysis into a single dataset that can be captured and collated to support the future development of underpinning information that supports emergency management professionalisation and research.

Research methodology

The underpinning research question examined ‘What human capacity demands should inform the development and appointment of an emergency manager?’. A 20-year period of emergency event inquiry reports was examined. To undertake the research a list of emergency events was required from which to obtain judicial and semi-judicial inquiry reports. The reports were analysed as part of the research.

Any research undertaken in emergency management is likely to be based in the first instance on a list of events that had occurred in Australia. Professionalisation of emergency management requires information as to the nature, scope and number of emergency events with a level of authority to support consistent ongoing learning and research. The research and ongoing learning aspects are only achieved if common data are collected alongside copies of the lessons management or other post-event reports. For the research conducted for this study, details of the human capacities of the emergency manager were required, however, other research needs may need other information. For this research, a single database had to be constructed as there was no single authoritative Australian database.

The collection, collation and analysis of the emergency events was undertaken using Microsoft Excel and pivot tables. The emergency event inquiry reports analysed for this research were all judicial or semi-judicial in nature. Judicial inquiries occur in a legal environment such as criminal or coronial courts. Semi-judicial inquiries, including royal commissions and formal legislated inquiries, have a legally enforceable requirement to answer questions and provide information. Judicial and semi-judicial inquiries are conducted for emergency events that have significant impacts upon communities, based in part on their complexity or consequences.

To retrieve the lists of emergency events, search criteria were applied to the databases identified. Search criteria included the terms ‘Australia’, ‘disaster’ and ‘emergency’ to collect the broadest range of potential information.

The initial collection of information provided 802 entries. Data collected for each identified emergency event included the name, date, location, type, inquiry type, internet URL and source database. That list of data fields was expanded to include details of any inquiry identified and if the report was located and retrieved. The initial 802 entries were categorised by emergency type and summarised. The emergency type for each event was determined by examining the event description. In some instances, an emergency can lead to multiple effects, for example, a cyclone can lead to flooding. In this case the original emergency type (the cyclone) was listed as the category. Any subsequent effects of that emergency (the flooding) were not used in the collated tables. The results of the categorisation and examination of the data collected are shown in Table 1.

In collating Table 1, the issue of dates of events became apparent. Emergency event dates were identified in many forms and included the date of onset of the emergency or a nominated arbitrary date during the event period. This showed that there was no apparent standard applied to the recorded date for an event.

Table 1: Initially collected Australian emergency events collated from multiple data sources 1 January 1997 to 31 December 2017.

Emergency type	Count
All-hazard	11
Bushfire	138
Criminal	5
Cyclone	181
Earthquake	7
Environment	12
Fire	15
Flood	148
Health	21
Industrial	28
Insect infestation	3
Landslide	4
Marine	6
Storm	169
Tornado	26
Transport	25
Tsunami	2
Terrorist	1
Total	802

Each entry was re-examined with a view to determine, as closely as possible, the start date of the event. After establishing a start date, it was observed that further refining of the dataset was required. In refining the data, further clarification of key words applied in the search process was required.

The originally applied search terms of ‘disaster’ and ‘Australia’ returned several results containing events that affected Australians but did not occur in Australia. These events included the Bali Bombing in 2005, the Samoa tsunami in 2009 as well as cyclones that had been named when they formed at sea and at a significant distance from Australia but did not subsequently make landfall on Australian coastlines. As the research question had sought events that occurred ‘in’ Australia, these external events were excluded from the final dataset.

The consolidated list contained 11 entries that related to inquiries conducted in Australia between January 1997 and December 2017. These inquiries were broad-ranging and examined emergency management issues in general. However, they had been undertaken because of a series of emergencies, not a specific emergency. These 11 broad-ranging inquiries were considered and retained in the dataset for further review as the data analysis progressed because their broad nature added to the richness of the data. They were coded as ‘all hazards’ in recognition of the breadth of issues examined.

The 11 all-hazard coded events are an important source of data for the emergency management body of knowledge. They are retained in the data and included in the proposed

Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset in a manner that recognises and differentiates the data for future research and learning.

The initial result of 802 emergency events between January 1997 and December 2017 may seem a large number. The inclusion of insect infestation and criminal acts may be surprising. However, the number and content are symptomatic of the underlying issue of emergency management not being classified as a profession, evidenced by the lack of consistency of data-recording. Thus, the many processes applied to the data are a result of having no agreed data collection nor recording rules for emergency management. It is possible that any emergency event can be reported as an emergency or a disaster because the definitions of those terms are not agreed nor applied uniformly across Australia. Dates are also not accurately applied and databases do not apply consistent criteria.

As a result of this first refinement of the data, the total number of events for analysis reduced from the initial 802 to 706. Many of the data sources had duplicate events because of the way their dates were recorded (e.g. only recording events by month and year or using different dates) or because of different names used to describe the same event. Each entry was examined and a single date applied for each event.

The next review of the data considered the description of each event and more duplicate entries were identified. These duplicates were marked and subject to 2 rounds of checking before being removed from the data. As a result of the identification of duplicates, the number of event entries for consideration in the research further reduced from 706 to 457 events, summarised in Table 2.

A body of knowledge is identified as fundamental to the recognition of a profession (Green and Gates 2014, p.80; Jensen and Kirkpatrick 2022, p.427; Trofymowych 2007, p.430). For emergency management, part of the required body of knowledge is a definitive list of events that could be referred to by emergency managers. Tables 1 and 2 highlight the lack of a body of knowledge in emergency management as there is not a definitive list of emergency events available for use. A definitive list would include standard data fields, agreed inclusion criteria and definitions and other data such as copies of inquiry reports. As emergency management is not yet a profession, there is no central body to decide on criteria for how to classify an emergency or a disaster. While some work is underway and some groups and organisations are collating data, a definitive list has not been agreed. While some local and international databases were identified, there is no agreement about the data fields required or information collected. This research developed a list of data fields to collate and examine the data in support of the research question.

Table 2: Entries after duplicate events were removed from the initial dataset for the period 1 January 1997 to 31 December 2017.

Emergency type	Count
All-hazard	11
Bushfire	66
Criminal	2
Cyclone	79
Earthquake	4
Environment	11
Fire	8
Flood	100
Health	12
Industrial	19
Insect infestation	2
Landslide	2
Marine	4
Storm	98
Tornado	21
Transport	17
Terrorist	1
Total	457

The 457 events (see Table 2) did not include details of any emergency event inquiry reports produced. Further searches were conducted to identify and locate inquiries that had been conducted in relation to the event. The lists of data, inquiries and research papers used in the development of Table 1 formed the first potential source of inquiry information and locations. From these data sources some inquiries were retrieved; others were located from internet searches. Each inquiry located was downloaded for further examination.

For this process, no criteria were applied to the type of inquiry. The aim was to identify and locate any inquiry that had been conducted for each emergency event in the

data. As a result, 157 events were identified as having had an inquiry conducted that could be located and retrieved. Once located, the inquiry type was noted in the database. The results are shown in Table 3.

For this study, the focus was on judicial and semi-judicial emergency event inquiry reports. The 157 events (see Table 3) with inquiries located were reviewed to identify those that had been subject to a judicial or semi-judicial inquiry. Judicial or semi-judicial inquiry reports were required for this research due to their greater level of rigour. Judicial inquiries were clearly identifiable as they are led by judicial officers and were predominantly part of royal commissions, trials and coronial inquests. Semi-judicial inquiries are those where there is a requirement to answer questions or provide information, but these are not conducted within a court-type process. Semi-judicial inquiries are not always led by judicial officers; the range of inquirers is broader and the legislative support for the activity is varied.

Application of the semi-judicial inquiry definition removed internally conducted inquiries where a staff member or consultant conducted an internal review. The internally conducted inquiries and reviews may not have had the same level of rigour applied to the investigation as an externally conducted, independently led inquiry.

Examination of inquiries reduced the events from 157 to 63 events for inclusion in the research. The final 63 included 9 of the 11 previously identified non-incident-specific (all-hazards) inquiries. The remaining inquiry types spanned a range of inquiry types, thus giving a breadth of data to inform the research. The updated list with those 63 inquiries categorised is presented in Table 4.

The final 63 events were reviewed and grouped according to the state or territory jurisdiction in which they occurred. All states and territories were represented in the final

Table 3: Emergency events identified that had an inquiry conducted.

Emergency type	Agency	Independent	Parliamentary	Royal Commission	Trial	Coronial	Total
All-hazard		9	2				11
Bushfire	1	29	9	1		6	46
Criminal					2		2
Cyclone	1	38					39
Earthquake		1					1
Environment		1					1
Fire		1				4	5
Flood		30	2				32
Industrial		3	2	1		3	9
Landslide						1	1
Marine						1	1
Storm	1	5					6
Transport		1				1	2
Terrorist						1	1
Total	3	118	15	2	2	17	157

Table 4: Emergency events subject to judicial or semi-judicial inquiry.

Emergency type	Independent	Parliamentary	Royal Commission	Trial	Coronial	Total
All-hazard	7	2				9
Bushfire	11	9	1		6	27
Criminal				1		1
Cyclone	2					2
Environment	1					1
Fire	1				4	5
Flood	3	2				5
Industrial	2	2	1		3	8
Landslide					1	1
Marine					1	1
Storm	1					1
Transport					1	1
Terrorist					1	1
Total	28	15	2	1	17	63

dataset with only one event from each of the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. The largest number of inquiries were held in Victoria. The range of emergency events ensured a broad range of data to inform the research. The results of the jurisdiction-based analysis are shown in Table 5.

During data collection, total deaths were captured as this could trigger a judicial or semi-judicial review. A coronial review, for example, is usually only conducted where deaths occur. The 63 events included 485 deaths. As such, deaths could be considered for inclusion in the minimum dataset and included in the emergency management body of knowledge because deaths trigger inquiries.

Some events were subject to multiple inquiries. For example, the Melbourne thunderstorm asthma event in 2016 was subject to an Inspector-General inquiry and coronial inquests for each death. This resulted in 88 inquiries being captured for examination in the research.

The lack of consistent definitions, dates, incident or emergency event naming and an authoritative database of emergency event inquiries shows the lack of a consolidated body of emergency management knowledge.

Ethics

This research received approval from the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee, approval #H19294.

Findings

The Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset has been developed to address the gap identified in collating and providing data to support this and future research into emergency events in Australia. The dataset is proposed to contain a standard set of data fields. The dataset will be able to be collated

Table 5: Emergency events for examination broken down by jurisdiction.

Emergency type	ACT	Aus Gov	NSW	NT	Qld	SA	TAS	Vic	WA	Total
All-hazard		1	1		2	1		2	2	9
Bushfire	1	3	3		3	1	3	7	6	27
Criminal								1		1
Cyclone					2					2
Environment									1	1
Fire					3		1	1		5
Flood					1			4		5
Industrial			2	1				3	2	8
Landslide			1							1
Marine			1							1
Storm								1		1
Transport					1					1
Terrorist			1							1
Total	1	4	9	1	12	2	4	19	11	63

Note: ACT (Australian Capital Territory), Aus Gov (Australian Government), NSW (New South Wales), NT (Northern Territory), Qld (Queensland), SA (South Australia), Vic (Victoria) and WA (Western Australia).

as a single page addendum to future emergency event inquiry reports to support the collection and collation of consistent data suitable for ongoing continual improvement and research functions.

The data fields recommended for inclusion in the dataset include those required to provide for consistency in event naming conventions, start dates (and finish dates where appropriate), location details, deaths and injuries, details of lead and recovery agencies, inquiries undertaken and the location of the inquiry reports. Table 6 shows the Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset fields and descriptions. A table format is used to allow collation of the required data by removing the description field and replacing it with the required data once collected.

Discussion

This study showed that the total content of the body of knowledge for emergency management is not yet agreed.

However, one aspect of that body of knowledge is the ability to determine the happenings that are being referred to when describing emergency events. The Australian Emergency Event Uniform Minimum Dataset provides an initial standard that can be discussed and agreed across the emerging profession that will support the standardised collection of data to support future lessons management and research.

The need for a uniform minimum dataset

Several reasons for the Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset arose during the research. Firstly, there is no agreed source of information for emergency events in Australia. This research identified multiple lists of emergency events. The multiple lists are held by different organisations with no agreed organisation or repository holding a 'master list'. There may be further lists in existence across various emergency management stakeholders and researchers that were not identified in this research. The lack of a consistent list of events

Table 6: Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset fields and descriptions.

Field	Description
Event type	Used to describe the event type. Where multiple event types arise, the primary causal event should be listed in line with the description used by the Control Agency naming convention. A single primary event type should be used. Event types should be selected from either Fire (Urban), Fire (Rural), Flood (Riverine), Flood (Dam Break), Storm (including severe wind, rain events and associated storm surges), Cyclone, Drought, Earthquake, Landslide/Landslip, Tsunami, Thunderstorm Asthma, Transport Accident (including Road, Rail, Air), Deliberate Events (including criminal acts and terrorism events), Cyber (including communications system failures), Technology or Infrastructure (including statewide blackouts, water system failures), Primary Industry (including animal and plant disease, marine events), Health (including all forms of human disease outbreak), Industrial Accident, Hazardous Materials. If the emergency is a multi-event or multi-hazard review then an event type should be chosen to reflect this or be listed as All-Hazards.
Secondary consequences	Used to describe the secondary consequences arising from the primary event. Secondary consequences could include Fire (Urban), Fire (Rural), Flood (Riverine), Flood (Dam Break), Storm (including severe wind and rain events), Cyclone, Earthquake, Landslide/Landslip, Tsunami, Thunderstorm Asthma, Transport Accident (including Road, Rail, Air), Deliberate Events (including criminal acts and terrorism events), Cyber (including communications system failures), Technology or Infrastructure (including statewide blackouts, water system failures) Primary Industry (including animal and plant disease, marine events), Health (including all forms of human disease outbreak), Industrial Accident, Hazardous Materials.
Event name	The name of the event as applied by the Control Agency.
Start date	The start date as nominated by the Control Agency.
Start time	The start time as nominated by the Control Agency (*where known).
Control agency	The agency or organisation that had the primary role to control the response to the event.
Location	The start location and extent of the event. This may be a street address and may include an area affected via size or description.
Deaths	Any known deaths as reported by the Jurisdictional Police agency.
Injuries	Injuries that required transport to a health facility/hospital (*details of subsequent admissions to hospitals or treatments are not required).
Property damage	A summary of the damage caused by the emergency event (e.g. the number of homes and business premises destroyed or affected).
Other losses	Describes the nature and value of other related losses (e.g. environmental, business operations, infrastructure and social capital assets with reported insured loss value).
Level of response	Describes if the event was managed at a local, regional or state level by the Control Agency.
Level of recovery	Describes if the event recovery was managed at a local, regional or state level.
Lessons process	Describes the type of lessons management process undertaken (internal debrief, internal lessons management process, external independent report, judicial or semi-judicial inquiry).
Lessons process location	Describes if the outcomes of the lessons process are available and the location (URL) or contact point.

constrains the ability to identify opportunities for learning from previous events. As stated by Santayana (2009), 'if you cannot remember the past, you are condemned to repeat it'.

Secondly, from the lists identified, there was no information consistency in the data held for each event. Where some data field names were consistent, the content of that field was not. The analysis noted many events with similar but inconsistent names for the emergency. The analysis noted that some events were listed in different databases with different start dates. Some events were listed in the databases even though they did not affect Australians. A database that included international emergency events affecting Australia would be considerably larger and harder to maintain.

Continual learning is supported by lessons management. A lessons management process is documented in the Lessons Management handbook (AIDR 2019). The handbook provides a standardised means of undertaking and documenting lessons management processes such that changes to policy, education, community resilience, response and recovery operations can be enacted. However, the existence of those lessons process outcomes is not listed nor recorded. The location of the reports is not shared. An Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset will provide a means of recording the lessons process (including internal reviews) and, more importantly, the location of the documented process. This study identified that the availability of reports of lessons processes was not uniformly available. Only 151 reports were able to be located for 457 events.

The uniform fields

The Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset (Table 6) proposes a set of uniform fields to be collected by agencies and organisations that report on emergency and disaster events. The data fields contain a description that should allow for uniform data capture to occur. The provision of a table allows the initial development of a uniform list of emergency events. The information required in the minimum dataset can be obtained at the time of the event, however, its recording and sharing as part of emergency event reports will allow for further information generated to be linked to the one defined event. Further event information that may arise over time includes insurance, environmental, social and other recovery information that is developed and collected after the event. This data may be collected into a supplementary set of data in future iterations of the dataset.

Implementation of the Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset requires a range of actions in practitioner, inquiry author and academic environments. Practitioner engagement is required to share the model and collaborate to develop understanding and acceptance.

Inquiry event authors, including Inspectors-General of emergency management, Natural Hazards Research Australia and Australian state and territory coroners and those undertaking inquiries such as royal commissioners will require separate engagement. Other bodies such as the National Emergency Management Agency, AIDR and AFAC (Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council) are key organisations that must support implementation. Authors of the inquiry reports will require consultation to seek support for the regular publishing of the minimum dataset as an appendix to their work.

Academic involvement includes research, publishing of journal articles, national and international conference presentations and incorporating ongoing feedback. The academic community would be a large user of the information contained within the dataset. Engagement by academia with agencies, organisations and event inquiry authors will support the collation and publication of the information in the standardised table.

Foreseeable issues and roadblocks

The lack of profession status means there is no clear path or model to develop the underpinning knowledge required. The implementation of the Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset may face the same issues and roadblocks as other emerging changes to the sector. Issues such as inertia and the lack of understanding of the dataset or its need may arise. Some agencies or inquiry authors may not support the change in their reporting practices. Tertiary education models will need to support this work. These roadblocks and issues are not unique to this potential model and have been described by Dippy (2025a, 2025b).

Champions can support the pre-identification of potential road blocks and issues and identify options to address them. Champions can support the pre-identification of potential issues and identify options to address those issues. Champions can advocate for the dataset in their respective areas of work. The work of the champions is not separate from, but integral to the ongoing professionalisation of emergency management in Australia.

The Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset can be a catalyst to accelerate the work of professionalisation. The ability to 'sell' the dataset to practitioners, inquiry event authors and academics is key to both implementation of the dataset and the journey towards professionalisation that emergency management is undergoing.

Conclusion

This paper examined the issue of data consistency that arose during research into the human capacities of the Australian emergency manager. The broader research

identified that there was no central database of emergency events that is collated across Australia. The databases that did exist contained inconsistent data entries that did not allow for a single, consistent and coherent list of Australian emergency events to be collated and shared.

This paper proposes an Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset to allow the uniform collection and collation of emergency and disaster event information. A uniform dataset will provide consistent, contemporary data to support improvements in practice and the development of the emergency managers, response managers, recovery managers and practitioners in the emergency management sector.

Proposed development activities supporting the dataset require agreement of practitioners, authors and academics and possible changes to databases that hold this important information.

The Australian Emergency Management Uniform Minimum Dataset supports the passage to professionalisation and will require work for implementation across practitioners, inquiry authors, policy makers and academia. The implementation work required can be undertaken in parallel to other professionalisation actions underway.

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