

# AES 2013 Conference Evaluation

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**3 February 2014**

## **Executive Summary**

The 2013 Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) conference took place in Brisbane, Queensland, and has been evaluated on the basis of an online survey of conference participants. This represents the third year in which the approach of an online survey after the conference has been used.

Responses to the conference were generally positive. Overall, participants rated the conference experience positively. Learning opportunities, networking, and skill development were recognised as positive elements of the experience.

Comparison with the previous two years, however, shows cause for concern. Assessments of the learning and skill development opportunities were lower than for previous conferences, and negative comments were made about the quality of the program and some elements of the conference arrangements. New aspects of the conference, such as the use of social media, continue to attract little support or use.

Some suggestions are provided for consideration in planning future conferences.

## Overview

This report provides the results of the 2013 AES international conference. It covers both the pre-conference workshops and the three-day conference.

## Evaluation approach and sources

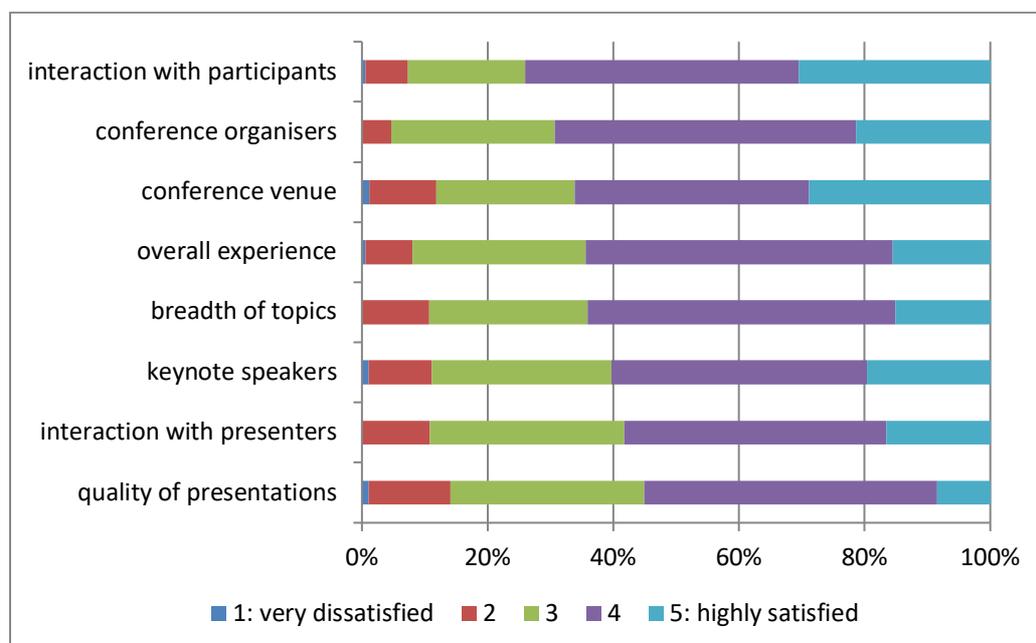
Discussions were held with conference organisers, including the conference managers. A post-conference survey was conducted online, using SurveyMonkey, of all pre-conference workshop and conference participants. Invitations were sent to 360 people, with two follow-up invitations to those who had not responded. Surveys were completed by 179 people, for a response rate of 50%. This was lower than the 57% response rate to the 2012 post-conference survey, or the 65% response rate in 2011.

## Evaluation responses

### Overall reaction to the conference

Survey respondents were generally positive in their reactions to the conference, although comparisons to the previous two years (later in this report) shows a decline in overall satisfaction. As shown in the following graph, more than half of all respondents were highly satisfied (with ratings of 4 or 5) across all eight topics about overall satisfaction levels.

**Figure 1: Overall Satisfaction Levels**



Respondents were asked what they valued most about their conference experience. The most common positive comments referred to learning and networking opportunities.

**Table 1: most valued elements of the conference**

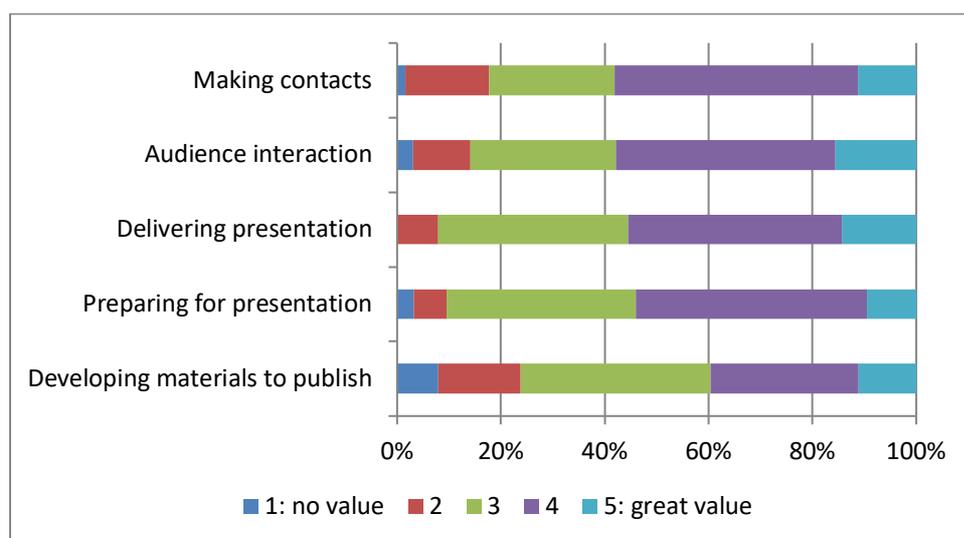
Element	Number of citations	Percent of total responses
learning opportunities	120	67%
networking opportunities	105	59%
one or more keynote speakers	71	40%
expertise & knowledge of presenters	63	35%
breadth & variety of presentations	48	27%
camaraderie and inclusiveness	43	24%
leading edge ideas and innovations	37	21%
interaction with keynote speakers	12	7%

Respondents were also asked to identify up to three things AES could improve in future conferences. The most common criticism was about the conference food, with comments made by 44 people about the catering, some in very strong terms. Other comments or suggestions involved more extensive vetting of presenters, a greater emphasis on innovative or leading edge practices in evaluation, attention to selection of keynote speakers, locating the pre-conference workshops at the same place as the regular conference for greater accessibility, and more opportunities for networking with other conference participants.

### Value for Presenters

Presenters were asked what value they received from different aspects of their participation. Unlike earlier years, they were not asked what value they had expected.

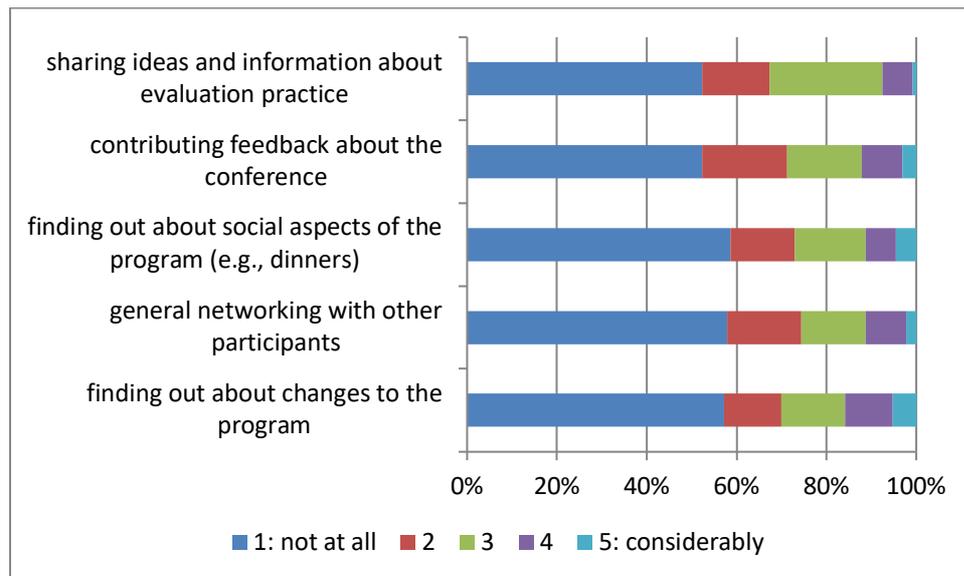
**Figure 2: Value received from presentation activities**



## Use of social media and new features of the conference

Relatively few people said that they had used social media during the conference. 39 people said they followed other people’s postings on Twitter, and 23 said they had themselves tweeted during the conference. 22 people followed the conference page on Facebook, and 9 posted about the conference on Facebook.

**Figure 3: perceived usefulness of social media**



Participants were asked whether they attended any of the following features of the 2013 conference, and to rate their usefulness.

- Conversations with keynotes
- Emerging agenda session with Jess Dart
- Hot topics tables
- Evaluation book club
- AES forums
- Online program
- Q&A plenary session

More than 70% of survey respondents did not respond to this question. Of those who did answer, the only feature that received a significant positive response was the Q&A plenary session.

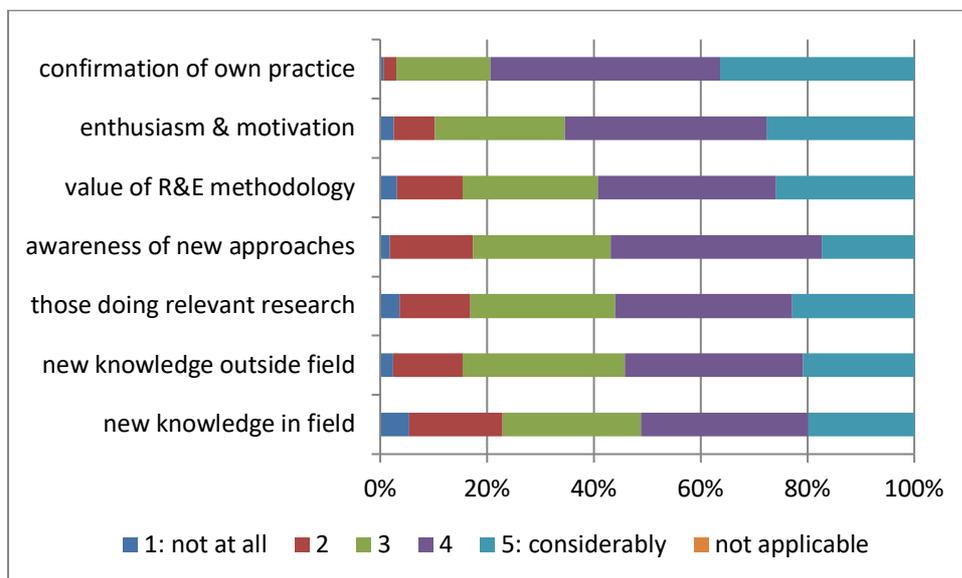
## Impacts of conference participation

The survey asked about the impacts of conference participation in terms of knowledge transfer, including knowledge about current developments or the development of evaluation skills. Respondents were asked about the extent to which conference participation provided any of the following:

- new knowledge or understanding in your field of practice (such as education, health, or social services)
- new knowledge or understanding from outside your field of practice
- confirmation of your own practice and beliefs
- awareness of new research/evaluation approaches
- understanding the value and use of evaluation methodology
- identification of people or organisations doing research relevant to your work
- research/evaluation skills
- increased enthusiasm and motivation to pursue evaluation

Personal responses, about greater enthusiasm and motivation and about confirmation of the individual’s own practices, were rated most highly, as shown below.

**Figure 4: knowledge or understanding gained from conference participation**



Respondents cited the following as examples of skills gained from participation in the conference.

**Table 2: skills gained from conference participation**

Skills in conducting evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mixed-methods approaches</li> <li>• developing evaluation questions</li> <li>• program logic or theories of change</li> <li>• inclusive or participatory evaluation approaches</li> <li>• dissemination of evaluation findings, including presentation of analytical results</li> <li>• approaches for assessing value for money</li> <li>• better tools to recognise cultural understanding</li> <li>• useful software and other new technologies</li> <li>• use of case studies</li> </ul>
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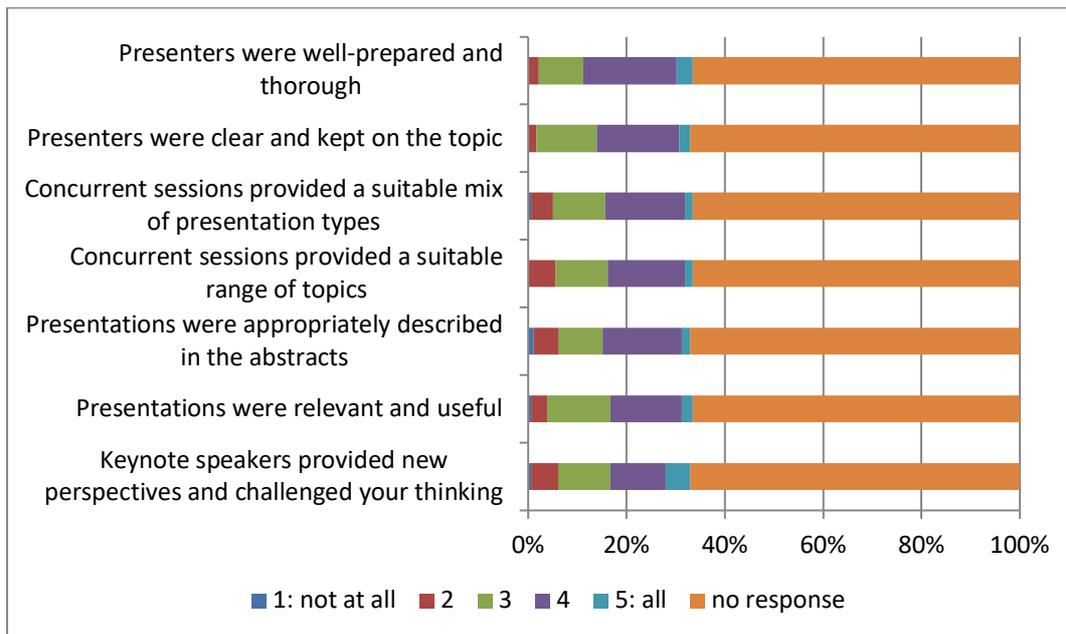
Use of evaluation for improving planning and solving problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use of developmental evaluation</li> <li>• use of performance measurement</li> <li>• importance of situational awareness and embracing complexity</li> <li>• integration of evaluation into project cycles</li> <li>• how to bring people or organisations along on the “evaluation journey”</li> <li>• need to focus on the person rather than the program</li> </ul>
Information about a policy or program area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• indigenous evaluation</li> <li>• non-profit sector</li> <li>• evaluation practices in international development</li> </ul>
Information about research/evaluation completed or being done elsewhere	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• information about evaluation work being done in New Zealand, especially with regard to indigenous issues or programs</li> <li>• robust use of quantitative data</li> <li>• politics in evaluation</li> <li>• evaluation capacity building</li> <li>• PhD research, including a study into the impact on program staff of involvement in evaluation</li> <li>• The concept of evaluation as a trans-discipline</li> <li>• evaluation work being done by DFID (UK Department for International Development)</li> <li>• meta-analysis in education</li> <li>• Red Cross rapid assessment</li> <li>• range and intensity of evaluation work being done across Australia</li> </ul>
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fellowship</li> <li>• data presentation</li> <li>• how to measure collective impacts</li> <li>• use of Prezzi for presentations</li> <li>• collaborating with two people on an evaluation presentation, which led to working together on a joint project</li> <li>• how to advocate for evaluation through storytelling</li> <li>• use of stories in evaluation</li> <li>• lack of political and strategic thinking underpinning many evaluations</li> <li>• preparation for and presentation at the conference</li> </ul>

Survey respondents were asked to assess how much they agreed with each of the following statements.

- Keynote speakers provided new perspectives and challenged your thinking
- Presentations were relevant and useful
- Concurrent sessions provided a suitable range of topics
- Concurrent sessions provided a suitable mix of presentation types
- Presenters were clear and kept on the topic
- Presenters were well-prepared and thorough

As shown below, most people did not respond to this question. Those who did respond had a mix of views.

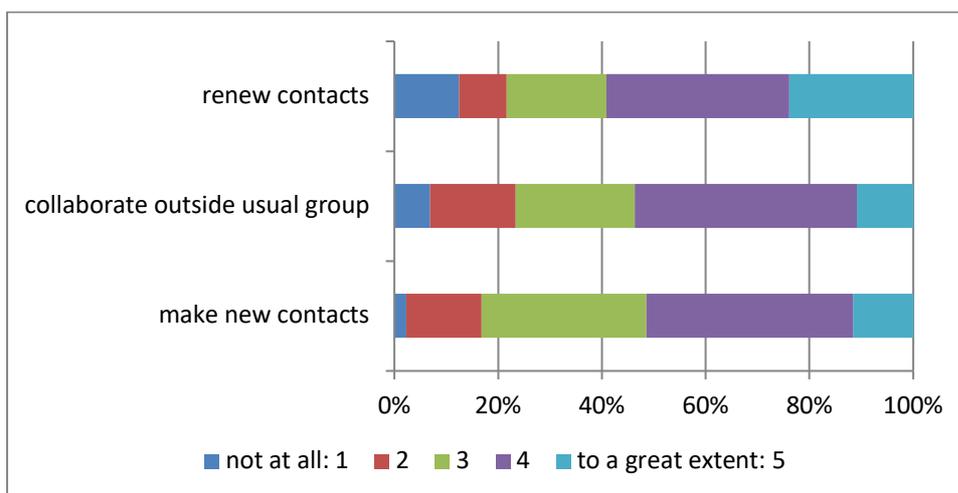
**Figure 5: level of agreement with statements about the conference**



Respondents were asked about how conference participation affected their personal and professional networks. They were asked to assess the extent to which taking part allowed them to:

- renew contact with people they already knew
- make new professional contacts
- collaborate with people outside their usual groups of colleagues

**Figure 6: Impacts of conference participation on networks**



Responses on the question about networks were fairly mixed. While 59% said they were able to renew contacts at the conference (rating the conference importance at 4 or 5), 22% said they had

not renewed contacts (with ratings of 1 or 2). Responses on the other two questions were similarly mixed.

People who attended the 2012 Adelaide conference were asked to reflect on their experience since that time. 62 people said they attended the Sydney conference. Of these, 41 (66%) made contacts that expanded their professional networks, 21 (34%) identified useful research, 33 (53%) learned about useful evaluation approaches or methods that they expect to use in their future work, and 26 (42%) learned about evaluation approaches or methods that they had already used in their work.

## Information about Participants and their Conference Attendance

Survey respondents were asked to assess their levels of evaluation knowledge and skills. 165 people assessed their levels of evaluation expertise. 19 people (12%) described themselves as inexperienced (with no background in evaluation or novices), 61 (37%) rated their skills at the middle of the range, and 85 people (52%) described their skills as “advanced” or “expert.”

82 people described themselves as evaluators, and 22 as researchers. 13 described themselves as policy analysts, 16 as project officers, 11 as program managers, and 11 by different descriptions.

Respondents were asked where they do most of their evaluation work, and where they are based.

**Table 3: professional affiliations**

Sector	Number who do most of their work in this sector	Number based in this sector
Australian commonwealth government	29	22
Australian state government	34	26
Australian local government	2	2
New Zealand central government	16	12
New Zealand local government	0	0
Private for-profit	6	5
Academic	7	27
Community or not-for-profit	20	22

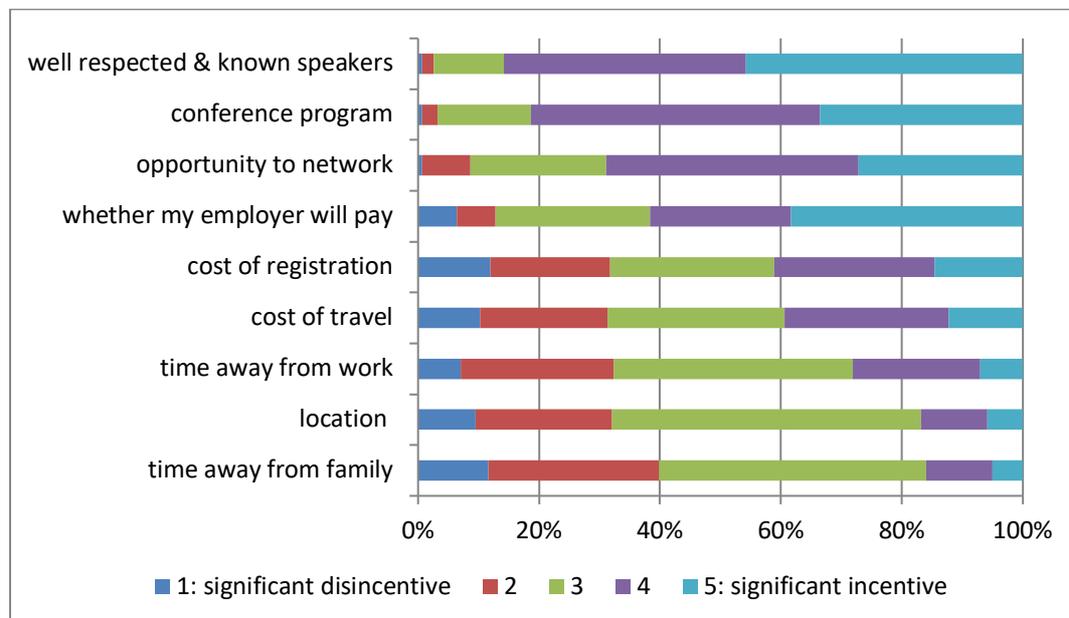
When asked why they attended the 2013 conference, respondents gave the following answers:

- 32 to attend a workshop
- 62 to hear the keynote speakers
- 128 for training and professional development
- 62 to give a paper
- 90 for networking.

When asked about what factors affect the decision on whether or not to attend a conference, positively or negatively, 86% cited internationally recognised speakers as an incentive for attendance.

81% cited the conference program as an incentive, 69% cited networking opportunities, and 62% employer willingness to pay. Opinions on time away from work and the costs of travel and conference registration were mixed, being described as either incentives or disincentives. Location and time away from family were generally described as disincentives for attendance.

**Figure 7: Factors Affecting Decision to Attend a Conference**



63 people said they anticipate attending the 2014 conference in Darwin. 37 said they do not anticipate attending, and 62 said they don't know whether they will attend or not.

117 respondents (72%) reported that they are AES members and 43 (27%) that they are non-members. Six (3%) said they didn't know whether they were members or not.

## Comparison to 2011 and 2012 conference evaluations

The 2013 conference was the third evaluated by using a survey that remained largely unchanged. On the whole, responses were similar. There is evidence of declining satisfaction in a number of areas, however, as described below. Response rates to the survey have declined, going from 65% in 2011 to only 50% in 2013.

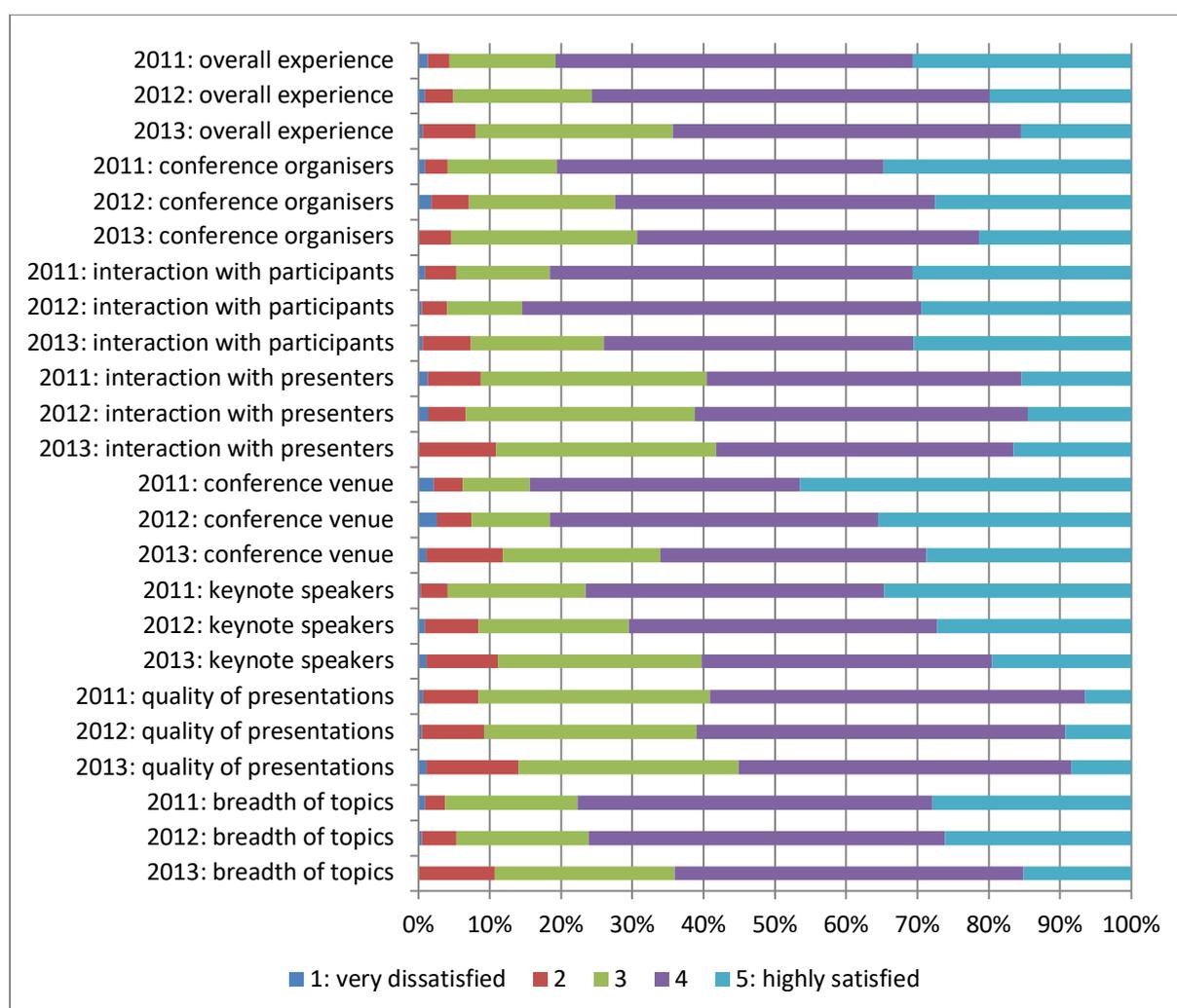
### Trends in overall satisfaction

As shown in the following table, overall conference ratings declined between 2011 and 2013 in several areas. The following table highlights the differences, showing changes in the proportions of respondents who rated each element at 4 or 5 on the five-point scale.

**Table 4: changes in high satisfaction ratings (4 or 5)**

	From 2011 to 2012	From 2012 to 2013	From 2011 to 2013
Overall experience	Down 2%	Down 12%	Down 14%
Conference organisers	Up 2%	Down 6%	Down 4%
Interaction with participants	Down 6%	Down 10%	Down 16%
Interaction with presenters	Down 3%	Down 15%	Down 18%
Conference venue	Up 2%	Down 3%	Down 1%
Keynote speakers	Up 4%	Down 11%	Down 8%
Quality of presentations	Down 8%	Down 3%	Down 11%
Breadth of topics	Down 5%	Down 11%	Down 16%

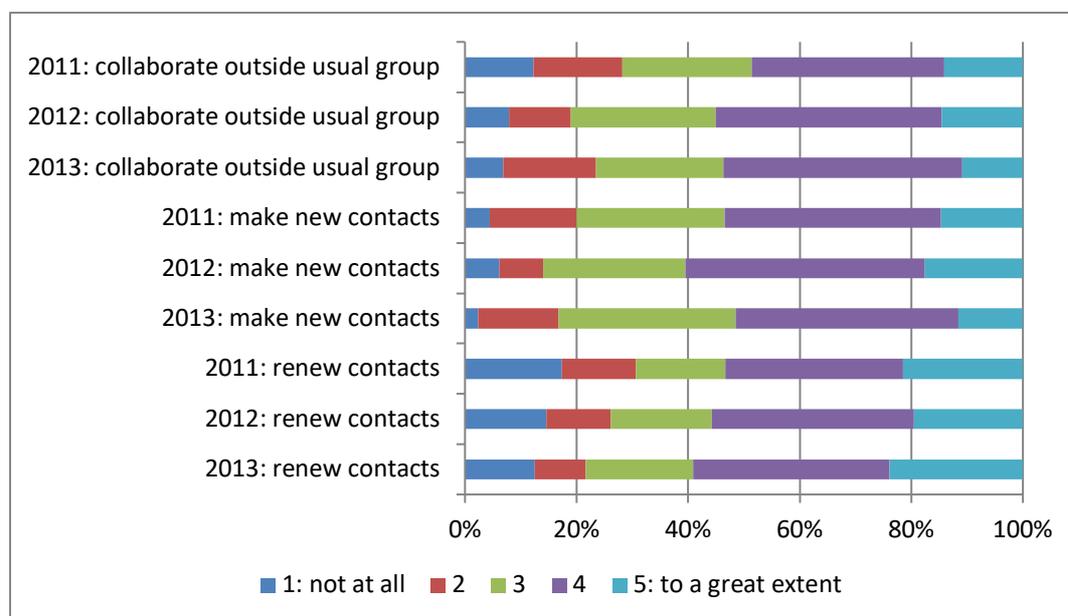
**Figure 8: overall conference satisfaction**



## Impact of conference participation on contacts or collaboration

Respondents assessed the impact of conference participation on their contacts and collaboration in similar ways across the three years, as shown by the following graph.

**Figure 9: conference impact on collaboration**



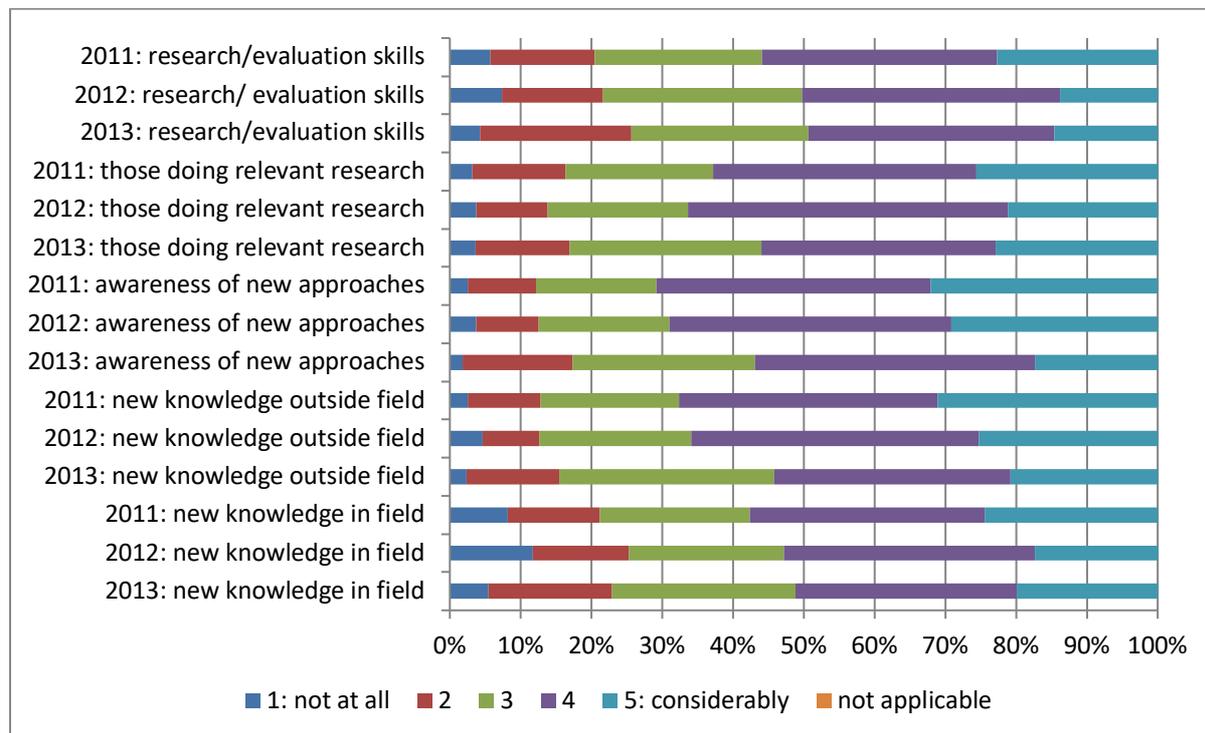
## Impacts on skills or knowledge

As shown in the following table and graph, survey responses over the three years showed a decline in the extent to which the conference had given them knowledge of new approaches or skills in research and evaluation.

**Table 4: Levels of high satisfaction with skill or knowledge achievement**

	2011 response (4 or 5)	2012 response (4 or 5)	2013 response (4 or 5)
Research/evaluation skills	56%	50%	49%
Those doing relevant research	63%	66%	56%
Awareness of new approaches	71%	69%	57%
New knowledge outside field	68%	66%	54%
New knowledge in field	58%	53%	51%

**Figure 10: skill or knowledge achievement**



Respondents who had attended AES conferences in the previous years were asked what impacts had resulted from their attendance. The percentages of respondents who agreed with the following statements in the two years were as follows. The responses for 2013 were sharply down from previous years.

**Table 5: Changes in assessed impacts**

	2011 (for the 2010 conference)	2012 (for the 2011 conference)	2013 (for the 2012 conference)
made contacts that expanded my professional network	73%	71%	23%
identified useful research	56%	52%	12%
learned about research/evaluation methods or approaches that I plan to use in future work	61%	52%	18%
learned about research/evaluation methods or approaches that I have already used in my work	56%	51%	15%

## Conclusion

The 2013 conference evaluation identifies some worrying trends for the AES. While responses to the conference remain generally positive, they reflect lower satisfaction levels and a perception that the conference does not respond to or focus enough on innovative or leading edge ideas and evaluation methods. New elements of the conference, such as new types of sessions and the use of social media, were little used and not generally considered valuable.

For the 2014 and future conferences, consideration should be given to how the conference program could better address new, leading edge ideas and evaluation approaches. Conference participants seem to want greater assurance that they will be exposed to new thinking and have opportunities for developing new skills in critical areas. Consideration should also be given to how participants could be given greater satisfaction with the conference experience, including the conference setting, the food, and social aspects of the conference.

It may also be desirable to seek wider views on future conferences. To date, the focus has been on getting feedback from conference delegates. The Society has not included exhibitors or sponsors in its evaluations, although they contribute to its success and may provide useful input.

## Considerations for future conference evaluations

- Consider expanding the scope of the evaluation. The evaluations to date have focused on attendees but have not explicitly focused on sponsors or exhibitors
- Address key recommendations for improvement
- Draw on expertise of AES Fellows and others within the Society to identify priority areas (leading edge) and ensure that the conference program addresses those areas
- Consider using social media to get member input to the program
- Reconsider how and when social media are used, recognising the need to attract more people to make social media a viable platform for the conference

## Recommendations

I offer recommendations for consideration by the AES Board and by the 2014 conference organising committee.

To address concerns about the quality and relevance of the conference program, identify evaluation approaches, methods, or debates that constitute the leading edge of evaluation practice through an environmental scan. This scan should include consultation with the AES Fellows and practitioners outside Australasia, such as Chris Coryn or Michael Quinn Patton. Use the conference website and Facebook page to invite AES members to comment on what they see as leading edge areas and areas where they most want training. The resulting priorities could be used as criteria for selecting pre-conference workshops or conference papers.

Consider reducing or discontinuing the use of social media for the conference, since three years of feedback have shown little use of Facebook and Twitter and little perceived value by conference participants. It appears that the conferences have not attracted a sufficient critical mass of people participating via social media to make them useful.