AUSTRALIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY GROUP MENTORING PILOT

Final Evaluation Report

October 2021

Prepared by the Group Mentoring Pilot Evaluation Team

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Executive Summary

The Group Mentoring Pilot was an online, group mentoring program delivered to members of the Australian Evaluation Society (AES) between January and June 2021. Four mentors (AES Fellows) each met with five or six mentees for monthly mentoring sessions focused on evaluation capacity building.

This evaluation of the pilot draws on both quantitative and qualitative data and presents key findings and recommendations for the AES Board.

The four mentoring groups differed in terms of the format of sessions, content focus, engagement strategies used and group norms and culture.

Mentees across all groups reported that they highly valued the accessibility of an online format and the opportunity to learn from peers as well as mentors.

Overall, evaluation participants reported that the program was beneficial and should be offered again.

22	**4**	**6**	**19**	**11**	**4**	**1**
Mentees	Mentors	Monthly sessions	Survey participants	Mentee focus group participants	Mentor interviews	Focus Group with AES Pathways Committee

Criteria of Merit	Key findings	Colours denote traffic light gradings
Effective	**Some mentees built awareness of evaluation theory and practice, developed 'soft skills' and built their confidence, and mentors built facilitation skills. An unexpected outcome was that a focus on mentee or group goals was not a feature of the mentoring sessions.**	
Relevant	**Program design, including the online and group mentoring model and the orientation session, produced a number of benefits for mentees and mentors and were supported.**	
Worthwhile	**Mentees, mentors and members of the steering committee consistently viewed participation in the program as time well spent.**	
Replicable	**Mentees, mentors and members of the steering committee unanimously agreed that the program should be implemented again, with minor tweaks. Two of the four mentoring groups intend to continue as self-sustaining communities of practice.**	

Strengths

Online delivery
Group format
Flexibility – content reflects mentee needs
Matching with mentors
Orientation session
Facilitation skill of mentors, with engaging session formats
Implementation support
No cost barrier

Areas for improvement

Grouping mentees with peers with common interests (e.g., approaches, sectors, experience)
Providing mentors with a menu of activity options and guidance about effective online facilitation
Clarifying expectations about roles and responsibilities
Creating an online resource library
Considering opportunities for one-on-one time between mentees and mentors or between mentees
Modification to program length

Benefits

Building confidence and overcoming isolation
Having time 'protected' to reflect
Accessing quality literature
Expanding networks
Expanding knowledge of theory and practice
Enjoyment

Key recommendations

1. **Continue to offer program**
2. **Consider minor improvements as captured in the recommendations**

Criteria of Merit and key evaluation questions

Criteria of Merit	Key evaluation questions	Sub questions
Effective *Mentees increased evaluation skills, knowledge and attitudes*	**KEQ1: How well did the program perform in helping mentees develop their self-identified skills and knowledge in evaluation?**	EQ1 To what extent did setting goals at group and individual level occur and how were these progressed? EQ2: To what extent were mentee needs and expectations about the program met? EQ3: To what extent did the mentees develop relevant, evaluation skills and knowledge? RQ1: What were the unexpected outcomes for the development of mentees' skills and knowledge?
Relevant *Online, group mentoring model met the needs of the program participants*	**KEQ2: To what extent is the design of the mentoring program relevant for meeting the needs of mentors and mentees?**	EQ4: To what extent was the matching process of mentees to mentors successful? EQ5: To what extent was the orientation and initial meeting successful? EQ6: To what extent did the online platform enhance or hinder relationships? RQ2: What skills were needed from mentors to support the groups? EQ7: To what extent does the group model work? RQ3: What were the unexpected outcomes relating to the design of the mentor program?
Worthwhile *Mentoring program was time well spent for stakeholders*	**KEQ3: How worthwhile was the mentoring program in terms of time spent for stakeholders?**	RQ4: To what extent do mentees and mentors think the program was time well spent? RQ5: To what extent would mentees recommend the program to other AES members?
Replicable *Model in its current form should be implemented again*	**KEQ4: In its current form should the mentoring program be replicated?**	RQ6: What were the barriers and enablers to implementing the program in its current form? RQ7: What changes/modifications would be needed (if any) in the current program to replicate it?

Key findings and recommendations

KEQ1: How well did the program perform in helping mentees develop their self-identified skills and knowledge in evaluation?		
Theme	**Key findings**	**Recommendations**
Goal setting	1. While two of four groups defined goals, no group focussed on goals throughout the program. This failure to use goals to structure sessions was not, however, viewed by mentees or mentors as an impediment to the program's success.	1. In defining the program purpose, place less emphasis on the setting of goals to allow mentors and their groups may elect to define and pursue goals, or not, depending on their priorities and preferences.
Were expectations met?	2. A clear majority of mentees stated their expectations of the program were met, particularly in relation to meeting and engaging with other evaluators. 3. Three of four mentors felt that their expectations of the program were met or exceeded. One mentor expressed that their expectations were not fully met. They attributed this to a mismatch between their own expectation that the group would participate actively in mentoring sessions, and the expectation of some mentees that the mentor would offer a 'lecture style'.	2. Ensure expectations of mentees are made explicit on application, so that mentees are aware that their active engagement and participation is expected and necessary for the program to succeed.
Knowledge and skill development	4. While mentors, some steering committee members and mentees were sceptical about the capacity of the program to have a measurable impact on knowledge and skills, many mentees did report that they had developed their knowledge of evaluation theory and practice, and that they had expanded their understanding of the application of key skills, and especially 'soft skills' like stakeholder management. Other mentees were reluctant to identify knowledge and skill development as a program outcome. 5. It appears many mentees underestimated their evaluation knowledge and skills at the program outset; an unexpected outcome of the peer mentoring model was that mentees came to recognise their own expertise and thus built their professional confidence.	

KEQ2: To what extent is the design of the mentoring program relevant for meeting the needs of mentors and mentees?		
Theme	**Key findings**	**Recommendations**
Matching with mentors	6. While those mentees that had a strong preference for a particular mentor were pleased to be assigned to that mentor, a considerable number had no preference. 7. Mentors were generally satisfied with the matching process, although one mentor felt that it was not worthwhile and that the process could be made random without significant impact.	3. Continue to provide mentees with biographical information to support matching of mentees and mentors' but consider whether mentors can provide more detailed information so that mentees can differentiate more easily between mentors. A checklist or reference guide could be used to support mentors in compiling this information. Explicitly naming mentoring groups with thematic titles may also assist mentees to differentiate.

	8. Mentees determined which mentor they wished to be matched with based on mentor biographies, but these did not enable clear differentiation between mentors.	
Matching with peers	9. Mentees consistently reported that they wanted to be part of mentoring groups with other mentees with whom they shared some common ground, be it evaluation sector, approach or level of experience. 10. Mentees who felt disconnected from their group due to high levels of diversity seem to have benefited less from participation in the program. Nevertheless, a degree of diversity seems to have been important to invite a range of new perspectives.	4. Consider ways in which groups can be formed around a common interest area, sector or evaluation approach for mentees. Matching between mentees to ensure groups are not too similar, and not too diverse, is needed to achieve optimal outcomes. Matching paradigms rather than sectors or roles may be a good approach. 5. Create at least one mentoring group for evaluators with ambitions to move into senior roles or take up leadership positions in evaluation. 6. Consider other platforms (such as WhatsApp or Facebook groups) through which AES members could connect with evaluators in their specific field or interest area.
Orientation session		7. Retain the orientation session; consider a number of minor improvements, including clearer articulation of the program purpose and mentors' and mentees' roles and responsibilities; time for break-out sessions, where mentees can get to know one another (e.g., five minute one on one sessions and ice-breaker or getting-to-know-you exercises); and time for mentoring group 'housekeeping' (e.g., establishing how the group will communicate, scheduling meetings etc).
Online format	11. Mentees strongly supported online delivery, despite some limitations associated with this approach. Advantages included; enabling access to geographically diverse AES members, enabling mentees and mentors to connect with those who shared professional interests regardless of geography, and convenience, given it didn't require mentees to forgo other duties including work and parenting. 12. The online format was also associated with some disadvantages including greater difficulty in forming relationships compared to face-to-face meetings, and technical and connectivity challenges for some mentees. 13. While mentors expressed that it was easier to run mentoring sessions in person than online, mentors nonetheless supported the use of an online format. 14. Good interpersonal connections are possible using online methods, and different facilitation techniques can enhance these connections.	8. Consider providing greater guidance and advice for some mentors regarding how to get the most out Zoom or similar platforms; this could be addressed in a pre-program meeting. 9. Retain the online delivery model.

Mentor skills	15. To be effective, mentors required self-reflection, facilitation, interpersonal and organisation skills, and a broad knowledge of evaluation theory and practice.	10. Provide mentors with a menu of options regarding activities, approaches and formats for discussion which have been effective for mentors in the past. The menu could be built over time.
		11. Provide mentors with a pre-program meeting, and mentor meetings throughout the program, where advice and support could be offered regarding effective engagement techniques to encourage collaboration and facilitate peer to peer relationship building in an online environment. The associate mentor from the 2021 program could be invited to lead this session, given their skills in this area.
Group format	16. The group model of mentoring was strongly supported by mentees, who highly valued the opportunity to learn from peers as well as their mentor. Mentees found the group format less intimidating and enjoyed the collegial support and camaraderie that the group model entailed.	12. Retain the group model of mentoring.
	17. The key limitation of the group model was that there was less capacity for mentees to 'drill down' with a mentor in relation to a specific career challenge or goal; however, mentees consistently reflected that the group model offered more advantages than disadvantages.	
	18. While some mentors were initially sceptical about whether a group model would work, all mentors felt this approach was successful. Mentors did have to adapt their mentoring approach given the group format.	
Unexpected outcomes of model design	19. Key unexpected outcomes of the design of the online, group mentoring model were that mentees derived enjoyment and energy from connecting with peers and their mentor, and that mentees experienced greater time to reflect on their work as evaluators.	

KEQ3: How worthwhile was the mentoring program in terms of time spent for stakeholders?		
Theme	**Key findings**	**Recommendations**
Worthwhile use of time	20. Mentees and mentors viewed participation in the program as time well spent. Mentees valued having time 'quarantined' for reflection and professional learning, learning from others, accessing resources, gaining confidence and developing their professional network.	

KEQ4: In its current form should the mentoring program be replicated?		
Theme	**Key findings**	**Recommendations**
Key enablers	21. Key enablers for effective delivery of the program were the online format, positive relationships between mentors and mentees, and that the program was free. Key barriers were scheduling challenges and technology difficulties.	13. Schedule all future sessions and 'offline' meetings between mentors at the earliest opportunity, to ensure dates can be put in diaries.
Group size		14. Form groups of six mentees, to allow for some absenteeism and retain group dynamic.
Program duration		15. Trial extending duration of the program to eight months.
		16. Encourage mentees to establish ways of connecting, such as via a WhatsApp group, so they can continue to engage as a community of practice beyond the program's duration, if they wish.
Cultural inclusivity		17. Consider cultural and other forms of inclusivity, as well as accessibility for people with hearing or vision impairments, when selecting mentors and establishing groups.
Offering the program again	22. Mentees and mentors unanimously agreed that the program can and should be offered again.	
'Apprentice mentor' model	23. In the one mentoring group where it was used, the 'apprentice mentor' model was effective; the extent to which this is due to the model itself, and the extent to which it is due to the particular personalities and capabilities in this particular group, is unclear.	18. Consider use of the master-apprentice model for future iterations of the mentoring program.
Possible improvements	24. Possible improvements to the program include: matching of mentees with peers; opportunities for 1:1 engagement between mentees and mentees / mentor; modifications to group size or entry-points; clarifying the program purpose; creating an online resource library; considering use of associate mentors; considering ways in which the program can be made more culturally inclusive; and increased resources and support for mentors regarding engaging facilitation strategies.	19. Consider anonymous pulse-checks (e.g., five minute anonymous online surveys) to provide mentors and program organisers with greater feedback about how the program is travelling and any improvements that could be made.
		20. Consider establishment of an online resource library where mentors and/or mentees could contribute to and access evaluation resources and templates to support mentoring sessions and to provide mentees with an additional resource so that they can improve their evaluation practice.
		21. Consider a number of improvements to a future evaluation approach, including revision of the program logic and evaluation framework, a modified approach to the use of surveys throughout the program, and early scheduling of focus group sessions.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The evaluand

The Australian Evaluation Society's (AES's) Group Mentoring Pilot was developed in response to a high level of demand for evaluation mentorship identified in the 2019-22 strategic planning membership survey. The group mentoring pilot was conducted online for AES members between January and June 2021, bringing together Senior Evaluators (AES Fellows) and mentees in four groups of up to six mentees for monthly mentoring sessions.

The purpose of the pilot was to provide a professional learning and skills development opportunity for AES members. It was anticipated that participants would benefit from both access to mentors' expertise, as well as the opportunity to engage with each other and to build a professional network.

Participation of mentors was determined based on experience and voluntary expressions of interest; mentors nominated an area of focus and this was used to support matching with mentees.

Mentees were selected based on an application process; of 49 people who applied to be mentees, 22 were selected to participate in the program. Selection of mentees was based on the following criteria:
- mentee's stated goals/expectations and alignment with their preferred mentorship focus
- diversity of personal and professional backgrounds within groups (to support peer learning)
- alignment of interests of each group to other potential mentees in the group (to support the group in working towards common goals).

Mentees were able to express an interest in participating in one or more of the mentoring groups as part of their application.

An induction session was held for mentees in January 2021. Following this initial meeting of all mentees, mentees met in their individual mentoring groups, with each group developing its own approach to its meeting format, norms and goals or sense of purpose. Given the program was a pilot, the use of diverse approaches across groups was intended as part of the program design, and mentees were expected and encouraged to participate actively in the evaluation process.

A webpage dedicated to the Group Mentoring Pilot was housed on the AES website.[1] The webpage provided links to a program guide, with detailed information about the program, biographies of mentors and an online form for applying to participate in the program.

The timeline for key phases of implementation of the program is shown below.

9 – 22 November 2020	Expressions of interest open to mentees
December 2020	Notification of successful applicants
January 2021	Pilot commences; All-group online orientation for mentees and mentors
January - June	Four groups met online for monthly group mentoring sessions
June	Pilot ends
August	All-group closing session including reflections and lessons learned

Table 1. Timeline for implementation of AES Group Mentoring Pilot

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[1] http://www.aes.asn.au/evaluation-learning/group-mentoring

Evaluation of the Group Mentoring Pilot

Given this is the first mentoring program offered by the AES to its members, there is particular interest in evaluation findings.

The evaluation has tested 'what works best for the mentorship program' and is utilization-focused (UFE) (Patton, 2008). The evaluation commissioner, the AES Board, will use the evaluation to inform decision-making about whether to continue the program in 2022 and what changes, if any, should be made to the program. This end purpose has driven the design of the evaluation.

The evaluation has involved four key phases:

- Phase 1 (January 2021): Analysis of program documentation and mentee application forms and development of an evaluation framework and key evaluation questions.

- Phase 2 (March – June 2021): Two web-based surveys of mentees and mentors to measure how well the implementation of the program is going and the appropriateness of the online, group model.

- Phase 3 (July 2021): Four focus group undertaken with mentees and one with the mentor support coordinators. Semi-structured interviews with each mentor. Data coding and thematic analysis.

- Phase 4 (July – September 2021): Data synthesis (using survey, focus group and interview data) and preparation of a final report for the evaluation, including preparation of recommendations for the AES Board.

The evaluation has been conducted by the Group Mentoring Pilot evaluation team, members of which are listed below:

Name	Role within evaluation team	Contribution to evaluation
Julie Elliott	Member, AES Pathways Committee	Oversight of evaluation
Jill Thomas	Senior evaluator	Oversight and support; qualitative data collection
Kate Glastonbury	Capstone student, Master of Evaluation, University of Melbourne	Evaluation framework
Ion Ioannidis	Capstone student, Master of Evaluation, University of Melbourne	Early stage evaluation design
Bronwyn Ledgard	Capstone student, Master of Evaluation, University of Melbourne	Surveys
Martina Donkers	Capstone student, Master of Evaluation, University of Melbourne	Qualitative data collection and analysis
Georgia Pinto	Capstone student, Master of Evaluation, University of Melbourne	Data synthesis and report writing

Project stakeholders

Key stakeholders for the Group Mentoring Pilot are listed below.

Stakeholder	Description	Role
AES Board	• Board members of the AES	• Commissioner of evaluation • Determine whether the program will continue to be delivered in the future and in what form
AES Pathways Committee	• AES members	• Review evaluation report and prepare recommendations for AES Board
AES Pathways Committee Mentoring Pilot Working Group	• Sub-group of AES Pathways Committee	• Development, delivery and oversight of program, including selection of mentees for the program (jointly with the mentors)
Group Mentoring Pilot Evaluation Committee	• Member of AES Pathways Committee • Senior evaluators (also AES members) • Five students (Master of Evaluation, University of Melbourne) who contributed to the evaluation as part of their capstone subject	• Evaluate Group Mentoring Pilot and prepare evaluation report for AES Pathways Committee
Mentees	• 22 participants in total, noting one left mid-program • The pilot was targeted towards emerging evaluators, mid-term evaluators and emerging leaders in the field (further demographic information about mentees is at **Appendix 1**)	• Active participation in group mentoring sessions • Participation in program evaluation
Mentors	• 4 mentors, all AES Fellows • One mentor was supported by an additional 'associate' or 'apprentice' mentor who co-ran sessions	• Selection of mentees for the program (jointly with AES Pathways Committee Mentoring Pilot Working Group) • Support and facilitate group mentoring sessions; mentors were able to conduct sessions in line with their and their group's interests and preferences
Mentoring Support Coordinators (MSCs)	• Members of the AES Pathways Committee Mentoring Pilot Working Group • Each mentoring group had an MSC	• Check in with individual participants during the course of the mentoring relationship to ensure the match is progressing smoothly • Be a point of contact for any questions or concerns that arise during the course of the mentoring relationship

Stakeholder	Description	Role
AES members	• The AES is a member-based organisation which exists to improve the theory, practice and use of evaluation for people involved in evaluation including evaluation practitioners, managers, teachers and students of evaluation, and other interested individuals. • Approximately 1000 members across the organisation	• Only AES members were eligible to apply to participate in the program • The program is part of a suite of opportunities offered to members by the AES to support effective evaluation practice (e.g., workshops, seminars, AES annual conference); it should complement these other offerings

Chapter 2: Methodology

Theoretical approach

Utilization-focused evaluation

The evaluation adopted a utilization-focused evaluation approach (Patton, 2012): it was designed to generate recommendations of use to program commissioners (the AES Board) and program designers. It was hoped that learnings from the pilot would inform future refinement and improvement of the program.

Patton writes that utilization-focused evaluation "begins with the premise that evaluations should be judged by their utility and actual use… evaluators should facilitate the evaluation process and design any evaluation with careful consideration of how everything that is done, from beginning to end, will affect use" (Patton, 2013, p. 1). Consistent with Patton's recommended approach, this evaluation has sought to consider the information needs of the evaluation's primary intended users, and to design, conduct and report on the evaluation so as to meet these needs.

Theory-driven evaluation

Program theory is frequently used in evaluation across a range of contexts (Rogers, 2007), and indeed has been elevated as an essential competency for program evaluators (Stevah, King, Ghere & Minnema, 2005). Rogers, Petrosino, Huebner and Hacsi (2000) argue that program theory evaluation consist of "two essential components, one conceptual and one empirical". They define program theory-driven evaluation as evaluation premised on ''an explicit theory or model of how the program causes the intended or observed outcomes and an evaluation that is at least partly guided by this model'' (p. 5). Coryn, Noakes, Westine and Schroter (2011) argue that "program theories are the crux of theory-driven forms of evaluation and are typically represented as graphical diagrams that specify relationships among programmatic actions, outcomes, and other factors, although they also may be expressed in tabular, narrative, or other forms" (p. 201). They identify five principles which underlie theory-driven evaluation:

> (a) theory formulation, (b) theory-guided question formulation, (c) theory-guided evaluation design, planning, and execution, (d) theory-guided construct measurement, and (e) causal description and causal explanation, with an emphasis on the latter.

This evaluation was theory-driven: it used a program theory, formulated at the outset of the evaluation, in order to guide articulation of key evaluation questions and sub-questions. The program theory or program logic (see Appendix 1) presented a series of inputs, activities, outputs and short, medium and long term outcomes which were anticipated, given a number of assumptions. The theory was designed, therefore, to represent both process and impact (Coryn et al., 2011, p. 201).

Program theory may be derived deductively (e.g. through analysis of the literature), inductively (e.g. through observation), or through a collaboration with stakeholders (Chen, 2005), or a combination of these approaches. In this case, the program theory was developed through both reference to the literature and stakeholder engagement. However, given that few online, group mentoring programs have been offered, at least in the pre Covid19 pandemic era, there was not a great deal of guidance to be found in the literature regarding how the program might achieve its outcomes.

Rogers (2000) asserts that "at their best, theory-driven evaluations can be analytically and empirically powerful and lead to better evaluation questions, better evaluation answers, and better

programs'' (p. 209). Rogers (2000) also argues that while theory-driven evaluations are "remarkably versatile" (p. 210), they are particularly well suited to formative evaluation, because they ''can lead to better information about a program that is important for replication or for improvement.'' (p. 232). Coryn, Noakes, Westine and Schroter (2011, p. 203) note that theory-driven evaluation asks us to determine not just whether a program is "effective or efficacious (ie. causal description)" but also to explain "how A causes B". Indeed, simply articulating or "exposing" the often-implicit mechanisms that are thought to underpin a program's operation is a useful process (Donaldson, 2007). As Rogers (2000) argues, "all programs are based on theories… although the theory is sometimes implicit rather than explicit, and incomplete or contradictory" (p. 232). In the case of this evaluation, the program theory and associated key evaluation questions have helped evaluators to develop a set of key findings and recommendations regarding how the program has performed and how it can be improved.

While this approach may be useful for formative evaluation, a number of limitations are associated with theory-driven evaluation. As Shadish, Cook and Campbell (2002, in Coryn et al., 2011) note, a long span of time (potentially beyond the duration of the evaluation) may be required for medium and long-term outcomes of a program to become evident. Moreover, as with any form of impact evaluation, it is difficult to disentangle the relative importance of a multitude of variables – internal and external to the program – in bringing about observed outcomes. Without a counter factual, for instance, we cannot know the extent to which the online format was a causative factor driving mentee engagement with the program. We have to rely heavily on mentee and mentor observations, an approach which has its own pitfalls and limitations (see below).

A further critique of theory-driven evaluation is that, particularly more linear models of program theory are unable to capture the complex ways in which programs generate outcomes in the real world. A number of scholars have proposed more "contextualised, comprehensive, ecological program theory models" (Coryn, Noakes et al). Rogers (2007) argues that too often program theories neglect to interrogate the "causal mechanisms" which occur, for instance, between an input and an outcome. These models "simply use unlabelled arrows to show the links", and as such they are of little use for formative evaluation aimed at effectively replicating or refining programs.

More complex models may have the potential to integrate systems thinking and to take into account contextualising factors external to a program. However, even these models are inevitably simplifications (Coryn, Noakes et al., 2011). It was understood by the evaluation team that the program theory, which was largely linear, could not capture fully the complex ways in which intended and unintended outcomes would be brought about – the program theory represented a working model which program designers and evaluators expected would need to be modified as more was learned about the pilot over time. The theory should be understood as only a first iteration.

In future, use of the theory could potentially be refocused to address causal attribution. While in this evaluation causal explanation, the fifth defining principle of theory-driven evaluation identified by Coryn et al. (2011) above, has not been attempted, this may be considered as a more sophisticated and complex program theory is developed in the future. As Rogers et al (2000) argue, causal attribution can be grounded in "evidence of achieve of intermediate outcomes, investigation of alternative explanations for outcomes, and pattern matching… and from program stakeholder assessments, or from data". Future evaluations of the program may test hypotheses regarding causal relationships in the program theory.

Data collection methods and approach

A mixed methods evaluation approach was used, with both quantitative and qualitative data analysed and synthesised in order to form evaluative conclusions.

Surveys

The evaluation team conducted surveys at the mid-point of the program, between 29 April and 7 May 2021. One online survey (using SurveyMonkey) was conducted with mentees and another with mentors. The mentee survey was sent to the entire population of mentees and had a 87% response rate. The mentor survey was sent to all four mentors and had a 100% response rate.

Survey data was exported to excel for analysis.

Focus groups and semi-structured interviews

Focus groups and interviews were conducted with mentees, mentors and the steering committee in tandem, and analysed together.

Participants

Participant recruitment was undertaken by an AES volunteer using email. All mentors, all mentees and all Steering Committee members were invited to participate. The inclusion of the Steering Committee recognised their dual role as program enablers and evaluation users, and supported the committee to reflect on their observations and impressions so far.

All mentors (n=4) agreed to be interviewed. 50% of mentees (n=11) and 75% of Steering Committee members (n=3) participated in a focus group. Mentees were allocated to a focus group on the basis of their schedule preference. The purpose of the evaluation was explained to all participants at the start of the interview/focus group, and all participants gave consent for recording and transcription.

Protocol development

Protocols were built to align clearly with the evaluation questions and data collection framework. It was decided that interviews should be 60 minutes and focus groups should be 90 minutes to support a detailed conversation while not being too onerous on participants. Given the framework included a total of 18 Key Evaluation Questions, Evaluation Questions and Research Questions and multiple indicators, pragmatic choices were needed about what to include and exclude to fit within the timeframe. Consideration was given to overlapping ideas within questions, areas of duplication within the framework, and issues where good data had already been collected.

Protocols were developed with reference to BetterEvaluation (Laidlaw, 2017), Punch (2009), and USAID (2011), along with input and feedback from other team members. Care was taken to ensure protocols were practical, easy to use, and supported participants to begin with broad and general reflections before narrowing to key areas of interest.

Given the evaluand is an online program, and participants are geographically dispersed, it was pragmatically decided to conduct all focus groups and semi-structured interviews using videocall software (Zoom). Differences in in-person vs. remote focus groups were considered (e.g. Hurworth, 2004), and facilitators/moderators were advised to note the differences in interactions and ensure turn-taking in focus groups.

Recording and transcription

Focus groups were recorded to ensure that analysis was grounded in the data and not in the researcher's impressions of the conversation. Online focus groups and interviews simplified recording, which was done automatically using Zoom. Audio and video files were secured in password-protected cloud storage.

While transcription is not strictly necessary for data analysis, transcription allows data to be analysed and presented in the same format (Ayer, 2021). To minimise workload in transcription, AI speech-to-text software (Otter) was used to generate transcripts. These were carefully reviewed and corrected, ensuring content was clear. Speech artefacts such as pauses and changes in tone were not included in the transcripts, noting analysis will focus on words and not the manner of speech. Ayer (2021) states that this choice must be made reflexively by the researcher based on objectives and audience, noting that all transcription choices necessarily change the data. Ayer also notes, and Patton (2002b) concurs, that when performed by the researcher, transcription can become the first step in the analysis process.

Data analysis and presentation

In *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2nd ed. 2013), Saldaña recommends using multiple compatible coding methods through a cyclical process of first- and second-cycle coding. The choice of coding methods is important – methods should be compatible and appropriate to the research objectives. This project identified and used five simultaneous coding methods to enable coding that was strongly aligned to the data collection framework as well as identification of emergent patterns and themes. Coding was performed using NVivo software. Coding was iterative, overlapping first- and second-cycle methods (Saldaña, 2013) to create confidence in the codes. Analytic memoing and jotting (Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014) supported the process. The unit of analysis was the individual.

Figure 1: Coding methods employed on the project – methods and explanations are adapted from Saldaña, 2013.

Structural Coding Uses the evaluation questions as the framework Chosen to structure the coding against the framework to centre utilisation and simplify synthesis	**Evaluation Coding** Identifies attributes and details that note quality Chosen to identify any explicit comments regarding quality of the evaluand
Sub-Coding Enriches detail and expands ideas Chosen to explore ideas and identify relevant emerging themes, including those not aligned to the framework	**Magnitude Coding** Quantitative transformation to identify frequency and/or strength of views Chosen to support the synthesis methodology, noting risks of quantifying data on a non-representative sample

Pattern coding Identifies patterns across the data

Underpins the other coding types; chosen to ensure relevant patterns and trends are noted.

Some scholars caution against solo coding (e.g. Gibbs, 2007) given the subjective nature of the task, however this is often required due to resourcing constraints, including in this evaluation. Saldaña (2013) recommends discussion of data with other team members as a mitigation strategy. Initial patterns, themes and ideas were discussed with the team members that led the interviews and focus groups, and further discussion was undertaken using screensharing to ensure that the codes were grounded in data.

Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) promote the use of matrices and other display techniques to support data analysis and presentation, quipping "you know what you display" (p104). A matrix display was used for this project, built using the series of evaluation questions and indicators from the data collection framework. Key consideration was given to how this display would support the synthesis methodology and active consultation ensured good alignment.

Consideration was also given to Miles, Huberman and Saldaña's (2014) concept of delineating *assertions* (declarative statements supported by evidence) and *propositions* (explanations that bring the analysis closer to theory). The matrix display included columns for "findings" for each of the three participant types (mentors, mentees and committee members, differentiated using colour), and a column for "interpretation" to clearly delineate statements summarising the data from interpretive statements. This was further supported through the use of a clearly different font for evidentiary quotes to easily identify data and researcher commentary. The design of the matrix was specifically intended to align with the utilisation-focused evaluation approach, ensuring ease of interpretation as called for by Patton (2012). The matrix display was iterated through discussion with evaluation team members to ensure the final format was fit for purpose.

Synthesis method

Synthesis in an evaluation context refers to 'the process of combining a set of ratings or performances of several components or dimensions into an overall rating' (Scriven 1991 in Davidson 2005, p.151). The synthesis approach for this project addressed the four Criteria of Merit (CoM), and the associated Key Evaluation Questions (KEQs) and evaluation sub-questions.

CoM (and associated KEQs) were mapped against performance indicators and data sources as part of a data collection framework; using the information in this framework, standards of performance pertaining to each CoM were defined. The standards effectively defined 'what good looks like' (Davidson, 2005) in the context of this program.

In rubrics, all KEQs were considered of equal value or weight. Only findings for key evaluation questions and sub questions were considered in the use of synthesis rubrics; research question findings were not considered, although data relating to research questions was presented alongside data from KEQs for ease of reference. The synthesis method took into account both the magnitude and volume of positive comments (Davidson 2005, p. 162). Business rules for rubrics are at Appendix 2.

An overarching program evaluation rubric was also used to capture the performance of each of the CoM and to show broadly how the program performed.

Synthesis rubrics were tested with the evaluation team and some members of the AES Pathways Committee before being finalised.

Oakden (2013) writes that rubrics 'offer a process for making explicit the judgements in an evaluation and are used to judge the quality, the value or the importance of the service provided' (Oakden 2013, p. 5). As Davidson (2005) argues, rubrics make transparent and explicit the bases on which evaluative judgements are made.

Ethics

Evaluation focus group and interview participants were informed about why data was being collected, how it would be used, and about whether or not they would be identified.

Participation in the evaluation was strongly encouraged but optional, and participants were free to withdraw from participation at any time.

Limitations

A number of limitations occurred in relation to this evaluation. Some of these were significant and should be taken into account when considering key findings and recommendations.

Sampling bias

22 mentees participated in the AES Mentor pilot program. Of these 11 (50%) contributed to evaluation focus groups at the end of the program.

The focus group participants were largely representative of the wider mentee group on the basis of:

- **Gender** – two males and nine females participated in focus groups and the same number did not participate.
- **Location** – where there were multiple mentees from the same state, such as NSW and Victoria, the numbers of participants and non-participants were quite evenly split (50%/50% and 43%/57% respectively). Numbers of mentees from metropolitan and regional areas were equally represented between focus group participants and non-participants.
- **Evaluation knowledge and skills** – mentees who identified their knowledge and skills as advanced, intermediate or novice were equally represented in focus group participants and non-participants.

However, in some respects the focus groups were not representative of the wider mentee group. Differences were observed between focus group participants and non-participants on the basis of:

- **Ethnicity –** it appears focus group participants who identified their ethnicity as originating from a non-English speaking country (Pacific Islander, East or Southeast Asian, African, European or Middle Eastern) were less likely to participate in focus groups.
- **Age** – 70% of mentees in the 35-44 age group and only 25% of the 25-34 age group participated in focus groups.
- **Sector** – mentees who worked in the national, state or local government, or the private/consultancy sectors were more likely to participate in focus groups (80%, 67% and 60% respectively). 86% of mentees who worked in the community/not-for-profit sector did not participate in focus groups.
- **Mentor group** – mentees from some mentor groups seemed much more likely to participate in focus groups than others, with the highest participation rate from one mentor group at 80% and the lowest from one mentor at 17%. Importantly, it seems that those from mentor groups with very high satisfaction rates were more likely to participate in focus groups.

Groupthink

Groupthink is a term used in social psychology to describe the phenomenon of people striving to form consensus within a group. Focus groups can have a tendency for groupthink where focus group members are influenced by one another's views and sometimes seek to avoid conflict by expressing similar or aligned views. This can create a bias in focus group data.

Data collection timing

While surveys were conducted at the program mid-point, focus groups and interviews were not conducted until the end of the program, which given it's coinciding with end of financial year, may have made it more difficult for some mentees to participate.

In future iterations of this program, it may be advantageous to collect data at multiple time points throughout the program.

Alignment with Key Evaluation Questions

For some evaluation sub-questions there were 'gaps' in data, with the question not addressed through either the survey or focus groups/interviews.

There may be debate regarding the extent to which the KEQ sub questions were in fact evaluative questions, or whether they are better defined as research questions. The evaluation team nevertheless attempted to differentiate between sub evaluation questions and research questions, and only sub evaluation questions (not research questions) were taken into account in reaching evaluative conclusions (as part of the synthesis method).

Data collection in the online environment

Mentors did note some mentees were not active participants in the program and were difficult to engage. It is notable that it is unlikely that we spoke to these mentees during the focus groups as all focus group participants actively shared their views and were comfortable speaking in an online fora. Given our data collection used the same technology as the mentoring program, any participants who were very uncomfortable in the online environment are unlikely to have participated.

Chapter 3: How well did the program perform in helping mentees develop their self-identified skills and knowledge in evaluation?

Summary

Overall, the program was somewhat effective in helping mentees develop skills and knowledge in evaluation. Mentors did not view skill and knowledge development as central to the purpose of the program and questioned the capacity of the program to have a measurable impact on skills and knowledge. Some mentees reported that they had increased their awareness of new concepts and developed their understanding of the application of practical strategies and soft skills, like stakeholder management, while other mentees felt that they had not substantively built knowledge and skills, although they had experienced a range of other benefits as a result of the program.

Both mentors and mentees built their capacity to undertake reflective practice, and mentors also built facilitation skills. Key ways in which skill and knowledge development occurred were through the mentor sharing ideas and readings as well as through group discussion and collective 'trouble shooting'.

Surprisingly for program designers, most mentees did not see value in a goal setting process for a group mentoring program, noting that this would be more relevant to a one-on-one program. However, while the extent of goal setting and progress against goals was very limited, this does not seem to have had a negative impact on the capacity of the program to offer value for mentees.

EQ1 To what extent did setting goals at group and individual level occur and how were these progressed?

In the mid-point survey, responses within groups suggest a lack of clarity about what constitutes an individual or group goal, and whether common goals had in fact been set. This may be due to lack of clarity in survey questions (noting however that survey questions relating to goal setting were pilot tested and revised). Of 19 mentee survey respondents, seven reported that 'group members have defined individual goals'; a further five reported that their group had defined group goals (survey respondents could only select one response). In total therefore, 12 mentees of 19 reported that they or their group had defined individual or group goals. Interview responses from mentors revealed that two of four mentoring groups had indeed attempted to set goals. Those groups that did attempt to set group goals did this by setting individual goals and then looking for common patterns, which were not easily found. The two mentors who didn't use goal setting substituted goal setting for a discussion about what topics and ideas should be addressed during the sessions.

> "We talked about it [goals] at our first meeting, but I think it would be accurate to say it never really featured."

> "No, we didn't do goal setting as such. But we did go through a process to as a group, identify the topics that we wanted to discuss. So I guess we didn't quite get to goal setting. But we did something that was similar to goal setting."

> "So we, we didn't have goals, we had topics. You know, I'd set goals if it was a training program, but goals as a mentor program, I find a little more difficult to

figure out, especially for a group because they all may have different goals and then what you do then?"

In cases where goals were set, they were not used to drive the structure of mentoring sessions, as program designers had expected, "We did [set goals], but it didn't stick". However, while no mentee noted a clear positive experience with goal setting, this was consistently viewed as inconsequential to the success of the program. No mentee, in fact, expressed that they were dissatisfied with the limited use of goals, although one said greater use of goals might have been helpful. Many mentees expressed scepticism around goals, including whether group goals could be effective, whether goals were appropriate to the timeframe, or whether goal setting was possible without knowing what to expect from the program.

> *"I don't know how feasible it is to sort of set a group goal that is as meaningful to every person"*

> *"I think the timeframe is really too short for any meaningful goal for me to set personally"*

> *"… for me, one of the most appealing things about this program was that it was a group program. So I didn't have to feel like I really knew exactly what I want to do. You know, I didn't have like this really clear plan or ambition or appetite."*

Indeed, many mentees, as well as mentors, reported that they had come to the program with an 'openness' regarding what the purpose and content focus of mentoring sessions should be. This was in part related to the group format of mentoring sessions – a flexible process of negotiation was needed to determine the approach of most value to participants; this was not easily reconciled with setting fixed goals at the outset of the program. One mentor reflected that:

> *"So really, it was a sort of rolling thing. It wasn't a pre plan, goal oriented, much more exploratory than that, much more sort of fluid."*

In those cases where mentees felt their goals were useful, these were more likely to be 'loose' goals:

> *"The assessment of progress against goals for me is a bit of a no brainer, like, my goals were loose enough that I've ticked a lot of boxes anyway. And even if I hadn't, jeez I've learned a lot and had a good time."*

Some mentees even noted that they would not have applied to a one-on-one program with strong goal setting priorities because they are not clear enough themselves on their career development.

> *A: "To be honest, I wouldn't have applied if it was one on one because I wouldn't have felt like I had a clear enough career plan or, you know, development priorities or whatever." B: "I would have felt quite intimidated by that." A: "Yeah." B: "But like being part of the group, the group was really good, group was great."*

Mentors observed in interviews that goals "don't seem to work particularly well in [a] group meeting" and that the role of goal setting in the program may need to be reconsidered: "I think there's some work to be done in helping both mentors and mentees use goals in a more meaningful way than I think they've been used in the pilot."

When asked in the mid-point survey how well the program met individual mentee's needs, mentors recognised the limitations of the online group mentoring model for addressing individual learning goals:

> *'the group format makes it unlikely that all individual needs are met as they have to share the time available to discuss specific issues raised by others in the group which may not be relevant to all group members' (Mentor survey question 11)*

and

> *'The mentees are getting information and there have been some good discussions and sharing of experiences. I am not sure that the mentees are gaining significant insights about their own situations though - it is all a bit general. A one on one mentoring situation would more effectively address individual situations and needs, that is clear'* (Mentor survey question 11).

The finding that goal setting was largely inconsequential to the success of the program suggests that a key underpinning assumption of the theory of change for this project was flawed as mentees and mentors found individual or group goal setting and attainment were difficult to undertake and were of peripheral relevance and value in the context of the online, group mentoring model.

Key finding: While two of four groups defined goals, no group focussed on goals throughout the program. This failure to use goals to structure sessions was not, however, viewed by mentees or mentors as an impediment to the program's success.

Recommendation: In defining the program purpose, place less emphasis on the setting of goals – mentors and their groups may elect to define and pursue goals, or not, depending on their priorities and preferences.

EQ2: To what extent were mentee needs and expectations about the program met?

15 of 19 mentees surveyed mid-program reported the program was meeting (five respondents) or exceeding (ten respondents) their expectations. Three reported the program was slightly below their expectations and one reported the program was below their expectations. By the end of the program it appears satisfaction levels had increased, with all mentees who participated in focus groups expressing that their expectations were met, to varying degrees.

Several mentees stated in focus groups that they had not brought specific expectations to the program:

> *"I guess I had pretty open expectations."*

> *"I was a pretty open book walking into it."*

Many mentees were attracted to the group aspect of the program and a clear majority noted they joined the program to meet other evaluators, and this expectation was largely met.

> *"I thought that would be really valuable going forward to make contacts."*

> *"I was really also just wanting to meet some peers in working in similar roles, just to broaden that base of people that I might be able to reach out to in the future."*

> *"In my organisation, I'm the only one that really does evaluation. So I didn't really have anyone to, you know, to have that support, and, you know, feedback and those kinds of things. And that's why this really helps."*

One mentee explained that the program partially met expectations, although they had not developed the peer network that they hoped for:

> *"I think it partially did [meet expectations]. …I guess we were all really different in terms of the type of roles we had, both the sectors we worked in, but also the type of evaluation like …So we were all coming at it from really different angles. And I think I was looking for a little bit more similarity in the group in terms of being able to bounce ideas off each other."*

This desire to be grouped with other mentees with which they share more in common was raised by a number of mentees.

Key finding: A clear majority of mentees felt their expectations of the program were met, particularly in relation to meeting and engaging with other evaluators.

Of the four mentors, one mentor said their expectations were met, one said they were exceeded, one said their expectations were not completely met, and one mentor was not asked this question. The mentor who expressed that their expectations were not fully met noted that this may be in part due to their expectations differing to those of the mentees in their group:

> *"I think a big one was the role of myself and the mentees, I'm pretty confident that some of them thought it was going was going to be … lecture style thing. And I basically refused to do that… So I would always do something, but I would always ask, make sure that they had to do something. And I'm not sure that that always sat well, of the five members, I think there was two of the five who didn't really want to do that… I did more [prompting and leading] than I wanted to."*

Consistent with this, members of the steering committee also noted in their focus group session that a mismatch of expectations could have been responsible in part for some mentees disengaging, or for some frustration on the part of mentors. Mentees may have, for instance, expected specific assistance with their career goals, rather than a more general engagement with evaluation theory or practice. Or they may have been unaware of the level of active participation being sought from mentors. As one member of the steering committee reflected:

> *"I think that even when we say … there's a new program to be launched… I think we can focus on what do you want to put into the program, not just be a passive person and expect to get a lot out of it… to help them think… How, will I be prepared to read an article once a month or prepare to give a presentation, be prepared to dwell on my competencies? How many hours a month, you know, this, this might take. Because it's not it's not a passive process, everybody has to invest a bit of time and energy… But we weren't really clear on what we were expecting of people. So we're pretty vague on that."*

Steering committee members also noted, however, that a lack of active participation may be due in part to cultural differences, and may not always mean that mentees are not getting anything out of the program, even though the intent of program designers was that mentees should participate actively:

> *"I mean, that's what often happens when you go to a seminar or conference, right? You might just sit there and at a session and take some notes, and then you go back to work."*

Overall, mentors consistently expressed that they were satisfied with the program, and that participation had been a positive experience for themselves, and for most mentees:

> *"I think it actually turned out better than I thought. I think I didn't expect the really high level of engagement and enthusiasm from the mentees that blew me away. And it's wonderfully satisfying that they're so keen. Reminds me of myself …I think it exceeded my expectations."*

> *"I mean, not that I had huge expectations. But did I think it was useful…And it was absolutely worthwhile doing as a pilot, and I would be suggesting to the AES keep going with it. There's enough good in this for it to be worthwhile."*

Mentors noted that the program had met their expectations in terms of providing an opportunity to give back:

> *"[It was] another way in which I can put something back into the field of evaluation, I mean, I've been very fortunate to have enjoyed … the networking and the input of the evaluation society over the years. In my early career it was so helpful. So I've always liked the idea of putting something back and feeling that maybe I could share some of my experiences and support others.*

Key finding: Three of four mentors felt that their expectations of the program were met or exceeded. One mentor expressed that their expectations were not fully met – they attributed this to a mismatch between their own expectation that the group would participate actively in mentoring sessions, and the expectation of some mentees that the mentor would offer a 'lecture style'.

Recommendation: Ensure expectations of mentees are made explicit at the point when mentees apply, so that mentees are aware that their active engagement and participation is expected and necessary for the program to succeed.

EQ3: To what extent did the mentees develop relevant, evaluation skills and knowledge?

Some mentees were hesitant to identify changes in their skill and knowledge. Many identified specific examples of things they had learned or deepened their understanding of, but were unsure if these were significant enough to constitute an affirmative answer to the question. Some mentees were more forthcoming about improving their skills and knowledge.

Some differentiated skills and knowledge:

> *"I think certainly my knowledge of some of the various topics related to evaluation certainly increased, I now learned from different perspectives and how they were dealing with things…whether it had any impact on my skills though, I think that's still out for judgment. I don't think it had as much of an impact on that, but certainly knowledge, my knowledge base increased, which is, you know, part of the core competencies, so I'm quite happy I can tick that box."*

Interestingly, mentors were consistently of the view that the purpose of the program was not primarily to build knowledge or skills:

> *"No, it's not a skills building exercise."*

> *"I certainly don't see it as a skills thing. I think it's a knowledge awareness thing."*

> *"I don't think they gained a lot of skills. They probably gained some knowledge and they gained some confidence. And they gained a community, a group, a community to talk with. And again, some structures and so on, but I don't think they necessarily learned a lot of new things."*

Nevertheless, mentors agreed that the mentees would have improved their awareness through the program:

> *"I'm confident people increased their awareness, and to some degree, their knowledge of substantive things. So what's the strengths and weaknesses of contribution analysis? You know, that sort of stuff? Or what are people's experience in working in a highly politicised program?"*

One mentor noted that mentees had benefitted from specific, practical skills-based discussions as well as broader discussion of theory. Indeed, a group mentoring format is ideally suited to building particular kinds of skills and knowledge through learning about how others have overcome practical challenges:

> *"One of the really useful sessions I remember having was around really practical skills around how to manage a client, if you're a consultant, how to work with the expectations of the commissioner around an evaluation, things like that, and … there's no textbook about that, there's nothing that you can read to learn about. And so I think the skills and knowledge were both about that, we did talk about… evaluation theory and content and things, but also, the practical skills of this work was probably a particularly useful area of skill development."*

The value of this focus on practical skill building was echoed by a mentee:

> *"Like the practical tips, there were things that I could directly implement, like at work and work on certain things…it was very applicable to what I was doing...there was some golden nuggets."*

Supporting the development of procedural knowledge – knowledge learned through experience rather than "book learning" - was also identified by a steering committee member as a key way in which a mentoring program could offer value to AES members:

> *How do you actually go about doing this? How do I get this person involved? …what's the best technique to use in this situation… these are the sorts of things you can do. It's much more practical problem solving…that procedural knowledge is really critical to developing your expertise as an evaluator… I think there is a gap that we should probably be looking at trying to fill which is in that procedural knowledge area, and some form of mentor."*

Others however, benefited from exploring the theoretical underpinnings of work they were already doing:

> *"From that sort of environment, they were able to identify things they wanted to learn about. So models of evaluation approaches, evaluation methods, and so on… that gave them an overview of things they'd sort of picked up ad hoc in their*

careers, but never put it together, none of them had done the CPE masters. So they didn't have a structure of learning, they just gained it on the job. And this gave them an opportunity to see what the structure is around evaluation approaches, and so on, and methods."

A number of mentees reflected that they had benefited from accessing quality resources through their mentoring groups, which had supported them to build their knowledge:

"Each meeting [the mentor] gave us access to some key articles and documentation that kind of helps to confirm for me anyway my knowledge."

"The other thing that I've gotten out of it is some practical little tools and stuff that people have just shared. Oh, here's this website that's got some really simple guidance about focus groups or something… just having that at a glance, sort of one or two page resource that we can draw on or that I can share with others as well, has been really useful."

Key finding: While mentors, some steering committee members and mentees were sceptical about the capacity of the program to have a measurable impact on knowledge and skills, many mentees did report that they had developed their knowledge of evaluation theory and practice, and that they had learned about the application of key skills, and especially 'soft skills' like stakeholder management. Other mentees were reluctant to identify knowledge and skill development as a program outcome.

RQ1: What were the unexpected outcomes for the development of mentees' skills and knowledge?

Mentees more skilled than they realised

Some mentors felt that mentees had perhaps underestimated their own evaluation skills and knowledge at the program outset. They noted that their mentees tended to be more skilled and capable than their self-assessments had indicated.

"*My group were really…further advanced in their knowledge and sort of practice experience in evaluation, than they would give themselves credit for. I thought I was getting this sort of, you know, beginners level 101 kind of thing. And they were more sophisticated than that. So they were all being a bit modest."*

One mentor linked lack of confidence with professional isolation:

"I think they actually came, in my group anyway, came pretty highly skilled already. But they didn't know they were skilled. And they didn't have the confidence to think that I know that, I don't think they realise they knew as much as they knew, or they were as skilled as they are. Because they're, again, isolated in their job, they're probably getting more criticism than compliments, in a sense. So they're, they're not building their professional confidence, I think perhaps, because they're isolated. And I know, isolated, maybe too strong a word, they're just by themselves. And so I think, if anything, what they, what we did was confirm their level of, of skill and knowledge, probably gave them some structures to think about their skills and knowledge."

Mentors noted issues like building confidence and community as more relevant to the purpose of a group mentoring program than building skills and knowledge:

> *"I think, for most of them, it was a more gradual thing or a bit of extra input or maybe giving them a little bit of encouragement."*

> *"And here's an opportunity for them to talk with other evaluators in similar situations, share issues, learn things. And so I think just that community, in my group has been probably the most valuable thing that they've gotten out of it."*

One mentor also commented that mentees had benefited from "seeing other people wrestling with some of the issues and challenges that they were individually experiencing."

Indeed, mentees identified gaining professional confidence as a key unexpected outcome:

> *"I guess for me, that, in itself was what I said about building confidence. I mean, that wasn't what I came into it for. So in a way that surprised me."*

> *"Just, you know, understanding that I wasn't alone, facing the challenges I have been, and that, you know, maybe compared to some of the others who were even newer along their journey than I was it made me realise how far I have come over the last few years. And that, in some cases, like maybe I do know what I'm doing, even though I feel like I don't. So… feeling a little bit more confident, I think, is probably one of the key things that I've come away with."*

> *"I met a whole lot of other people who were experiencing a very similar challenge. And although we didn't really crack it, I now feel… that a lot of the challenges I'm facing, everyone else is as well. So that was a really good learning for me."*

> *"I think probably what I gained more was a bit of confidence."*

The value in discovering and working through common problems was also noted by the steering committee as a key benefit for mentees:

> *"What I do understand is that people were very relieved or pleasantly surprised to hear that the issue that they have in the workplace, they're not unique to them. They're problems that people have experienced before, including the mentor."*

Key finding: It appears many mentees underestimated their evaluation knowledge and skills at the program outset; an unexpected outcome of the peer mentoring model was that mentees came to recognise their own expertise and thus built their professional confidence.

Synthesis rubric: Criteria of Merit 1: Effectiveness

Extent to which mentees increased evaluation skills, knowledge and attitudes

Standard	Definition – based on evaluation sub questions				Additional information – based on research questions
Clearly effective – a consistent story showing that the program was effective in meeting the needs of participants and supporting the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes	Evidence that most mentees developed relevant evaluation skills, knowledge and/or attitudes.	Most mentees felt their needs and the expectations were met. ✓	A significant majority of comments regarding effectiveness were positive. ✓	All four mentors felt their expectations of the program were met or exceeded.	Unexpected outcomes regarding mentee knowledge and skill development were consistently positive ✓
Mixed – In some respects the program was effective, but in other, significant respects or for a significant proportion of participants, it was not effective	Evidence that the experience of mentees was mixed in terms of the development of relevant evaluation skills, knowledge and attitudes. ✓	While some mentees felt their needs and expectations were met by the program, a significant proportion did not	Comments regarding effectiveness were highly mixed.	At least three of four mentors felt their expectations of the program were met or exceeded. ✓	Unexpected outcomes regarding mentee knowledge and skill development were both positive and negative
Clearly not effective – the program was not effective in supporting the development of evaluation skills, knowledge and attitude or meeting the needs and expectations of participants	Evidence that most mentees failed to develop relevant evaluation skills, knowledge and attitudes.	Most mentees felt that they their needs and the expectations of the program were not met.	Consistently comments regarding the effectiveness of the program were negative.	Two or fewer mentors felt the program did not meet their expectations.	Unexpected outcomes regarding mentee knowledge and skill development were consistently negative

Overall score

Overall, the program's performance against the effectiveness criteria of merit was mixed. While some mentees who participated in the evaluation reported that they developed evaluation knowledge and skills, a significant proportion did not identify knowledge and skill development as a key outcome of their participation in the pilot. Three of four mentors felt their expectations of the program were met. Unexpected outcomes were that mentees discovered they were more skilled than they realised, they developed their professional confidence and, in some cases, formed communities of practice.

Business rules for determining overall scores are at Appendix 2.

Chapter 4: To what extent is the design of the mentoring program relevant for meeting the needs of mentors and mentees?

Summary

Overall, the design of the program, including the use of a group and online mentoring format, met the needs of mentors and mentees. The group element of the program design was highly valued by mentees, and the online element ensured wider accessibility for mentees and mentors across different geographies with a range of other commitments. While almost all mentees reported that they were satisfied with matching with mentors, many indicated that matching with peers was more important and that the program design could be further improved by matching mentees with peers with similar levels of experience or similar interests. Almost all mentees reported that the orientation session was helpful.

While mentees and mentors identified a number of limitations with the online delivery of mentoring sessions, mentees consistently reported that benefits outweighed challenges. Mentees were highly positive about the group mentoring model, which enabled them to benefit from the knowledge and insights of peers, as well as mentors, and to build their professional network.

EQ4: To what extent was the matching process of mentees to mentors successful?

Studies of effective mentoring programs reveal that suitable matching of mentors and mentees is critical to a successful mentoring experience. For this reason considerable effort was expended by program designers in matching mentees to mentors based on mentee applications and short biographies provided by mentors, outlining their interests and approach.

Matching mentees with mentors

The mid-point survey revealed that a clear majority of mentees were satisfied with the process through which they were matched with mentors. 18 of 19 mentee survey respondents reported satisfaction with the matching with their mentor in terms of meeting their needs and interests; one respondent reported that they were dissatisfied.

The survey also asked mentors to rate their level of satisfaction with the matching process for mentors and mentees, in terms of matching skills and experience with mentee needs. Here, responses were more mixed. One mentor responded that they were completely satisfied, another satisfied, another somewhat dissatisfied, and another skipped the question. Mentors were asked in what ways, if any, the matching of mentors' and mentees' interests or needs could be changed or improved. Mentor reflections included that:

> *"In retrospect, matching was ad hoc. I was a strong believer in matching but now I think that I was mistaken; it's not that important. The group's dynamics is key."*

and

> *"The group members I had allocated to my group were all from backgrounds that I relate to. That has made a difference (positively) in being able to understand their issues and discuss strategies to address these."*

One mentor suggested that in future, the program could 'facilitate mentees directly signing up to a particular group rather than being allocated'. This may result in mentees self-selecting into groups that are clustered around a particular common interest. However, lack of intentional matching of mentees and mentors, as occurred in this program, also risks a greater number of mis-matches, where mentees and mentors diverge in their areas of interest and expertise.

Surprisingly, at the conclusion of the program, focus groups with mentees revealed that many mentees did not rate the matching process as significant; many were indifferent, or unable to judge the importance of matching with their mentor. However, given the matching process is largely invisible to mentees, it may be that mentees did benefit from the matching process and would have not enjoyed the program as much with a different mentor. Some mentees noted that their lack of expectations meant they were unconcerned with but happy about the matching process.

> *"I didn't have anything to compare the matching process to, I guess, but I've found, my mentor's fantastic."*

> *"I had an amazing mentor."*

Mentees who expressed a preference and were matched with that mentor were happy with the outcome:

> *"I did get to go with the person that I selected. The person that I selected, I had a discussion with one of the very senior, very, very experienced evaluators in the practice that I work in who knew just about all of those people…and I went with the person that she recommended as the best match for me."*

In end of program interviews, three of four mentors were very satisfied with the matching process, one thought that random selection would be just as effective and that it didn't make a difference. All mentors said they wouldn't change anything about the process.

> *"I think it worked pretty well. I mean, I was very happy with the people in my group…I hope that they thought I was reasonably suited to them. I think a couple of them did specifically ask to be in my group because of my background in relation to theirs. So I thought the matching process is pretty good. I mean, you're never going to get that perfect, and probably you shouldn't try for it for perfection there. But, you know, people were well informed. I mean, my group participants were informed about who I was and what I could offer."*

> *"I think it's a complete lottery, the matching process."*

One mentor explained how they were happy with the steering committee's matching process, and that they appreciated mentors having input in terms of who might be well matched for their group:

> *"By and large, we tended to follow … there were some criteria to become a mentee… I thought that worked well, but I think mentors need to have some options to, within the group, maybe the 20 that said, they want me, and I ended up picking six, I think you need some flexibility in there, for the mentor to have a look. And it doesn't take very long. It's not an onerous process. And so I think mentors were happy to have a go, to have a chance to make some selections within a group."*

Members of the steering committee observed that *"the matching and selection process was really intensive."* Committee members belief that matching was very important was grounded in the literature:

> *"I suppose… we knew that matching was really important. That was something that was clear out of the literature."*

One committee member noted that there ended up being very little obvious difference between the mentors as articulated to the mentees.

> *"I was always intrigued by the fact that when we spoke to them, they seemed to have very different ideas of …what their focus would be, and that was really great. But when they wrote it up, the groups weren't so dissimilar. And they weren't so unique. And I don't really know how that happened in writing … down. And then when people applied it was, it must have been difficult for them…"*

It appears that the information provided to mentees did not enable mentees to differentiate significantly between mentors. Perhaps for this reason, a number of mentees did not express any preference in terms of their mentor. It may be that mentees would more effectively be drawn to a particular mentor (and, inadvertently, peers with similar interests) if mentoring groups were more explicitly focused on a particular theme (for example, 'leadership in evaluation,' 'early career evaluators', 'impact evaluation', 'evaluation in the not for profit sector,' 'evaluation in the public service' etc.)

Key finding: While those mentees that had a strong preference for a particular mentor were pleased to be assigned to that mentor, a considerable number had no preference.

Key finding: Mentors were generally satisfied with the matching process, although one mentor felt that it was not worthwhile and that the process could be made random without significant impact.

Key finding: Mentees determined which mentor they wished to be matched with based on mentor biographies, but these did not enable clear differentiation between mentors.

Recommendation: Continue to provide mentees with biographical information to support matching of mentees and mentors, but consider whether mentors can provide more detailed information so that mentees can differentiate more easily between mentors. A checklist or reference guide could be used to support mentors in compiling this information. Explicitly naming mentoring groups with thematic titles may also assist mentees to differentiate.

Matching mentees with peers

The mid-point survey revealed a high level of satisfaction amongst mentees about matching with peers in their groups. 16 of 19 survey respondents reported they were satisfied with the matching with the other people in their group in terms of needs and interests; three reported they were dissatisfied.

In focus group, mentees consistently expressed a preference to be placed in a group with other evaluators with which they have more in common such as a group based on sector/industry, role type (e.g. consultant evaluator or internal evaluator) or other area of interest in evaluation:

> *"I think the mix of other mentees in the program meant that there was an aspect it didn't quite achieve around. How can I say it, I guess we were all really different in terms of the type of roles we had, both the sectors we worked in, but also the type of evaluation … there was one person who worked for a really large public service organisation, there was someone who was doing really community based landcare stuff. So we were all coming at it from really different angles… I also*

found that I was probably more experienced than some of the others in the group. And so that meant that I wasn't, I didn't really get that peer aspect that I was looking for.”

“The diversity of the group was sometimes a hindrance as well as a strength”

“I certainly think I would have gotten more out of it, if the other people in the group had more similar roles”

“There were, like one or two sessions, where I don't think anything from it was really applicable in terms of me taking it back to my own work or my own thinking about evaluation.”

“And no one else really had the knowledge to help me with my own particular issues with that, because it's just not something that is part of their practice.”

“I was probably the most experienced evaluator in my group. And then it might have been better for me to have been in a group of people with closer amounts of experience.”

“I found the group a little bit too broad.”

For others, diversity was a strength:

“And it was just nice, just to have, you know, a variety of different people in different areas and different sectors, whether they were internal evaluators or consultants, and bringing it together and being able to have an open chat about it.”

“I also found it really useful having… a diversity of participants… within a mentoring group…you want people sufficiently similar that you have shared interests and priorities. But also, you know, a bit of diversity is really useful, because I guess then you can learn about different ways of doing things. So, you know, we had people from the private sector and the public sector, I thought was interesting to hear different ways of doing things. The commissioner side as well as the people conducting it, small and large firms, even if it's to show that… challenges are common.”

Some suggested that mentees should be matched within groups:

“I think that's the key thing I think needs to be worked on, is the matching of the mentees within the group.”

“I'm not sure what the process would be to augment the matching. But yeah, that's, that's really the only thing that throughout my sessions, I was thinking could have been done better.”

For mentors, views differed regarding whether the diversity or similarity of their group was positive. One mentor viewed the diversity of their group as a positive element:

“I think if they were all from one, one sector, or one thing that they'd have probably been recognising the same things, but it was quite diverse. And … I don't

> *remember being aware of that … when the group was being pulled together. So that was quite good."*

Conversely, one mentor viewed the similarity of their group as a strength:

> *"My group is made up of people who had relatively similar work experiences or environments, they were often working in areas where there was research or higher education, involvement… So that lines up with some of my background. I think there was a real value that [unclear] people who had similar experiences similar questions, or whatever. That was probably the key thing."*

The mentor who noted that similarity was a strength also noted that there was still a level of diversity in the group:

> *"Yeah, yeah, different personalities and different experiences. And they might all been working in similar areas, you know, or have a similar orientation to their work. But you know, they're different people who bring different experiences."*

One viewed the diversity of the group as a weakness:

> *"They had nothing in common from a work perspective. One person's working at [a major NGO], somebody else's working with farmers on fertiliser use. Somebody else is working in international aid. … They didn't, from an, evaluation, substantive perspective, they didn't have a lot of common ground. They were very, very diverse."*

The mentor who noted diversity as a weakness said their group did not build peer to peer connections. On reflection with the interviewer, they identified that the group had little in common with each other, and that impeded their ability to connect with each other.

One mentor didn't discuss this topic.

One mentor noted that her group was entirely women, and this positively impacted the group dynamic.

> *"I think it was just a sense of connection and learning together that I think worked quite well. And I was lucky because I had a group of all women. And to be perfectly, brutally honest, it works better when it's just women. Because women feel, how would I say it, safer might be too strong a word, but just more comfortable. You know what it's like, you go out with a group of women, you have a rip roaring time, right, chuck a few men in and suddenly things are a little bit constrained. [laughs] Well it's the same with a mentoring group!"*

It is significant that focus group and interview data revealed that mentees did not feel the matching with mentors was highly consequential, and that they felt appropriate matching with peers was more important. In focus groups, one mentee reported that the mix of early career and mid-career evaluators within a single group meant the sessions were of limited value for more experienced evaluators. While early career mentees were able to benefit from the expertise and experience of more seasoned evaluators, those with a high level of experience who were hoping to address more advanced content and 'trouble shoot' with more experienced evaluators were left without peers in the group at their own level. One focus group participant, for instance, noted that she was 'holding back' in mentoring sessions so as to not dominate the conversation.

Key finding: Mentees consistently reported that they wanted to be part of mentoring groups with other mentees with whom they shared some common ground, be it evaluation sector, approach or level of experience.

Key finding: Mentees who felt disconnected from their group due to high levels of diversity do seem to have benefited less from participation in the program. Nevertheless, a degree of diversity seems to have been important to invite a range of new perspectives.

Recommendation: Consider ways in which groups can be formed around a common interest area, sector or evaluation approach for mentees. Matching between mentees to ensure groups are not too similar, and not too diverse, is needed to achieve optimal outcomes. Matching paradigms rather than sectors or roles may be a good approach.

Recommendation: Create at least one mentoring group for evaluators with ambitions to move into senior roles or take up leadership positions in evaluation.

Another consideration, beyond the scope of this program, is whether the AES could facilitate member grouping around common interest areas, for example as part of 'self-starting' peer networks – these could be encouraged to connect via platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook.

Recommendation: Consider other platforms (such as WhatsApp or Facebook groups) through which AES members could connect with evaluators in their specific field or interest area.

EQ5: To what extent was the orientation and initial meeting successful?

Of the 17 (of 19) mid-point survey respondents who attended the orientation meeting, six found the session extremely helpful, eight found it very helpful, and three found it moderately helpful, suggesting the meeting was successful in providing support to mentees. A number of mentees suggested further improvements that could be made to the session, including:

- clearer articulation of what the program seeks to achieve

- establishing how groups will communicate (e.g. via DropBox) and who is responsible for setting up zoom invites etc, so groups can 'hit the ground running'

- longer break-out sessions so group members can get to know one another better

- information from previous mentees and mentors about what was particularly useful and what contributed to a valuable experience (applicable to future iterations of the program)

- setting clear expectations about the roles and responsibilities of all program participants, including that groups are expected to be largely self-organising.

In end of program focus groups, only one mentee felt that the orientation session was not time well spent, given that the content addressed was "covered in the booklet". This mentee suggested that a "speed dating" style breakout session at the first session may have helped build interpersonal connections better.

Recommendation: Retain the orientation session; consider a number of minor improvements, including clearer articulation of the program purpose and mentors' and mentees' roles and responsibilities; time for break-out sessions, where mentees can get to know one another (e.g. five minute one on one sessions and ice-breaker or getting-to-know-you exercises); and time for mentoring group 'housekeeping' (e.g. establishing how the group will communicate, scheduling meetings etc).

EQ6: To what extent did the online platform enhance or hinder relationships?

Mentees' experience of the online format

Despite some challenges and limitations associated with an online mentoring format, mentees overwhelmingly supported this approach.

When asked in the mid-point survey if there was anything they particularly liked or disliked about the mentoring program being hosted virtually, mentee comments (of 19 survey respondents) leaned strongly to the positive. Benefits cited by mentees included: accessibility (many would have been unable to participate if not for the online mode), the ability to connect with like-minded mentors and peers around Australia and globally, and not having to spend time commuting. Key challenges cited included less spontaneity and difficulty in reading body language and building rapport, and poor internet connectivity, which for some people was an impediment to participation. However, survey respondents consistently noted that the benefits of meeting online outweighed challenges.

A number of mentees also noted that in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, people in general had become adept at meeting online; the online model was thus easily adopted by participants:

> *"I wonder if you might have been fortunate that during people's lock downs and whatnot, people got very accustomed to working on zoom. So any sense that it was strange or alien would be negated"*

> *"I think it is particularly easier for me because since COVID hit early last year, my team has had to shift and pivot. […] So I'm really comfortable with online delivery."*

Mentees who participated in the focus groups were comfortable and confident in the online space, and noted many benefits of the online model:

> *"I think online was a stroke of genius"*

> *"The conversations were still good online, we were able to share documents and work on things, probably just as well as we could have face to face."*

Several mentees noted that online enabled a level of convenience that made it possible for them to participate:

> *"I don't think I would have had time in my day otherwise, to actually physically go and attend meetings, it was quite easy to fit in"*

> *"I think for me, and certainly for one or two other people in our group, one of the biggest challenges and barriers with making the most of this opportunity and engaging with it, to its fullest is just time, like, everybody's so busy…"*

Given that a mentoring program is an 'added extra', over and above people's usual home and work responsibilities, and not something that anyone is being paid to do, there is a risk it is the 'first thing to go' if it is not made very easy and convenient to attend.

The greater accessibility of the online environment led some participants to say this was a better model than an in-person model:

> *"So even if there hadn't been COVID, [and it was] face to face, I think it would have been… not as good, quite frankly… it just enabled greater participation and broader accessibility. So I take my hat off to you there, I think that's great."*

Given AES's diversely located member base, an online program also offers a way to connect with a much greater range of people than an in-person program. This supports and enables interpersonal connections, because groups can be constructed around commonality rather than location. As one mentor explained:

> *"And that the mentors didn't have to be in the same location as the mentees. So you could get a lot more kind of similarity, but diversity at the same time. So people with similar interests, but being maybe geographically located in different areas."*

The potential for new kinds of communities of practice to form, where membership was not based on living in a common location, was also noted by a mentee:

> *"I think one of the main advantages was, I guess, the ability to put together groups that are not based on geography. They're based on some other sort of commonality."*

Importantly, it ensures that professional development and the benefits of AES membership are available to those in regional locations as well as population centres.

The benefit of an online format is discussed further in relation to 'enablers' for the program (chapter 6).

Despite the advantages of the online format, evaluation participants did also note drawbacks. A few mentees felt that an in-person session might have enabled better interpersonal connections.

> *"We might have built some better relationships. I guess, coming back to that other aspect I said about really wanting to build that network. I don't know if there's anyone that I'll stay in touch with afterwards. And I think maybe if we'd met face to face, there might have been a bit more of that informal, kind of chatter around that we really, you don't get in a zoom session. That's probably the only downside I can see."*

> *"It's not so much the just, you know, the sundowner where we can just, you know, make links and get together and develop the relationships that would probably be really helpful."*

For a few mentees the online format presented technical challenges. These do not appear to have greatly impeded participation however, except for a mentee based outside Australia, who was observed to have regular connection issues, "he would often be able to listen, but we wouldn't be able to hear him or you know, so that really impacted on him". For participants with very low bandwidth unable to support a video call, the AES could consider offering a mentoring group using a voice-only platform such as Discord, which can be easier to access on low-bandwidth connections. For participants experiencing short-term bandwidth issues, advice could be offered on lowering bandwidth – for example, Zoom uses much less bandwidth if a participant logs on using a mobile device, turns off their camera, and turns off the screen, resulting in a voice-only connection that uses less bandwidth. Zoom also supports telephone connections that do not require internet access; greater awareness of these features may help participants overcome short-term bandwidth issues.

In addition to connection issues, unfamiliarity with the technology used was another challenge for a very small number of mentees and mentors. Mentors and mentees who are unfamiliar with the software in use may need to be offered some support to help them use the technology effectively.

Key finding: Mentees strongly supported online delivery, despite some limitations associated with this approach. Advantages included: enabling access to the program to geographically diverse AES members, enabling mentees and mentors to connect with those who shared professional interests regardless of geography, and convenience, given it didn't require mentees to forgo other duties including work and parenting.

Key finding: The online format was also associated with some disadvantages including greater difficulty in forming relationships compared to face to face meetings, and technical and connectivity challenges for some mentees.

Mentors' experience of the online format

Overall, mentors seem to have found the online space a little more challenging which may result from the challenges of running/leading a group, or from less familiarity/day-to-day use of the relevant technology.

All mentors stated that running group sessions online was harder than running in-person sessions.

> "I'm a dinosaur in many ways, I prefer face to face. I run workshops online and face to face for work. The online are great, because you can go national or international, but the face to face, to me, people get more out of it. I think."

> "I guess I came away thinking that the online environment was more difficult to maybe than I had anticipated. We had no opportunity prior to meet each other face to face. And I don't think I'd appreciated that it might be difficult to have that initial sense of forming as a group. Doing it all online, I think it was a little bit harder than I realised."

> "I found it harder doing it sort of remotely than sitting in the room with them."

> "Communication is easier face to face."

One mentor didn't have a personal Zoom account and found use of the AES Zoom account clunky, "it's not friendly, you can't record".

Recommendation: Consider providing greater guidance and advice for some mentors regarding how to get the most out Zoom or similar platforms; this could be addressed in a pre-program meeting.

Two mentors clearly stated that, on balance, the benefits of running the program online outweighed the difficulties.

> "Would we have gotten more out of it face to face? Probably, but we could not have run it face to face with the group we had because they came from three different states, four different states including me. So I think it worked remarkably well. And I think the technology supports it quite nicely. I can't see any major drawbacks in it... we've got the technology to do it now, which we didn't have years ago. ... So I would argue for continuing in a group, I think there's a much greater gain than there is any loss."

> *"I think given we're a national organisation, or international, I think this has worked remarkably well… It would be unusual for me to argue you should go back to face to face on this, it would take a special situation."*

And for one mentor, members of their group were able to build strong interpersonal connections in spite of the limitations of the online environment:

> *"I think, for my group, for the individuals in my group, I think it was fantastic. They just got on so well. So our final meeting, just to give you an example, they, I said, normally, in a final meeting like this, we'd have a glass of wine sitting around the table. And they said, Well, why can't we do that. So each mentee has lined up with another mentee and bought them a bottle of wine and shipped it from their home area, shipped it to them. So at our next meeting, we're all going to open a bottle of wine each at our own place. So that's the sort of level of, just how well they got on."*

Key finding: While mentors expressed that it was easier to run mentoring sessions in person than online, mentors nonetheless supported the use of an online format.

Key finding: Good interpersonal connections are possible using online methods, and different facilitation techniques can enhance these connections.

Face to face meetings

One mentor suggested that "occasional face to face meetings," where possible, can inject energy into a group because they speed up the process of group members getting to know one another. Another mentor proposed a hybrid model including some initial in-person meetings and some online meetings to overcome the difficulties establishing interpersonal connections, however flagged that this would exclude members outside major cities.

> "*I think all things being equal, my suggestion would be to structure in a face to face meeting."*

> *"So, in Melbourne, you might have enough people with enough diversity of experience and insight to run it as a group, maybe. But I guess the AES should be careful not to exclude the members who are outside the big cities."*

Mentors were asked in the mid point survey to comment on the ways in which the online format 'helps or hinders the formation of peer connections or relationships'. All mentors reported that it is more challenging to form peer connections online compared to face-to-face interactions – the primary reason given for this was that there is not time or space for the 'informal interactions,' which facilitate relationship development, when using an online format. Future iterations of the program may consider how opportunities for informal interaction can be created; for instance through more peer 'break out' zoom sessions, or through opportunities for mentees to meet face to face.

A lack of opportunity to build informal relationships between mentees was also noted by some focus group participants, who suggested there may be value in program participants having the opportunity to meet in person at the AES conference; this would also enable development of a program alumni network.

Recommendation: Retain the online delivery mode and consider whether this could be complemented by opportunities to meet face to face at other AES forums.

RQ2: What skills were needed from mentors to support the groups?

Mentor views regarding skills needed from mentors

In the mid-point survey, mentors were asked what they feel are the essential qualities, skills or characteristics of an effective mentor. Key responses included:

- interpersonal skills such as active listening, empathy, patience and a sense of humour

- facilitation skills, including the ability of ask questions that will lead to discussion, and having a 'store of stories and examples to draw out as illustrations of key points'

- broad knowledge of evaluation theory and practice

- meeting and time management skills.

In interviews, mentors identified evaluation skills and facilitation skills as the key skills needed. The ability to reflect on their own practice and translate this into useful information to share with the group was also identified as a skill that was critical to the success of mentoring groups:

> "I think the skill that is most needed by a mentor is one of personal reflection and the ability to translate experiences into points or tips or for suggestions with others… it is… probably what you might call an educator skill… being able to see where your experiences may be relevant to others… It's not just about getting somebody who's a terribly experienced evaluator and knows everything about evaluation, that helps for sure, but it's not also about someone who's just good at facilitating discussion, but not bringing anything themselves to it. It's actually a different role than a facilitator or an expert. It's quite a discreet role."

> "And perhaps, for a good mentor, I'm going to suggest that perhaps it's more important to have decent facilitating skills than it is to have good substantive knowledge. That role of I guess, building a bit of consensus about what the group wants to work on, supporting people to be engaged, drawing out those that are sitting on the sidelines, and just watching. Those sort of skills, I think are probably more important than a good knowledge of evaluation, per se."

> "I have quite a strong technical interest. I can default into expert mode occasionally. And so I have to occasionally catch myself and go hang on, hang on. Don't start giving a technical explanation here. Let's talk to the group and ask them about their experience on this issue first."

While these mentors noted that the ability to reflect and facilitation skills may be more important than knowledge of evaluation, mentors also agreed that a deep understanding of evaluation was also key. Mentors reflected that AES Fellows were well positioned to offer mentees a broad perspective on evaluation theory and practice:

> "A good understanding of… not the skills so much, a good understanding of the literature, the various fields of evaluation, and access to that literature, was I think, really, really helpful, because they sort of come expecting you know to everything… the fellows are a good group for that, because they've been around a long time, they've got a lot of work. [That] doesn't mean it has to be only fellows. But I'm just saying they're not a bad group to go to."

Organisation was identified as a necessary skill. One mentor noted that where they lacked this skill, the mentees were able to step in:

> "I'm a pretty hopeless organiser of stuff, right? So, you know, I mean that's probably because of the jobs I've had for the last quite a long time, I've always had somebody helping me and clearing up my messes and doing all the meetings for me, and everything like that, right. So I'm really spoiled. So, I don't really have those skills, they're not very well developed. So what would happen is, if I hadn't sent the link out, if I hadn't done this, that or the other, one of the group would run to the rescue, and say, Hey, Penny, can you send us this or that whatever, wherever? You know, so in a way, my kind of incompetence made them sort of step forward. [laughs]"

Focus groups and interviews revealed that mentors don't necessarily need a complete skillset, but they do require an awareness of gaps in their skills and some deftness is engaging mentees to fill some of those gaps. This may be through supporting organisation of sessions, contributing knowledge on certain topics, or suggesting structures or mechanisms that might support discussion. However, it is noteworthy that there is an implicit power imbalance between the mentor and mentees, and this can result in some mentees being reluctant to take on leadership within the group.

Mentors reflected that mentoring a group online was a new experience, and they had had to learn as they went along to some extent, and to be agile and responsive to the cues and feedback of mentees. Group mentoring, as noted above, is distinct from teaching, lecturing, presenting, coaching, chairing – it requires its own, distinct skill set.

> "I didn't want to make it a teaching session. So I mean, I do teaching, but this is not it."

> "Maybe I'll start first by saying I think all of us, myself included, had a learning curve about how to do this."

Key finding: To be effective, mentors required self-reflection, facilitation, interpersonal and organisation skills, and a broad knowledge of evaluation theory and practice.

Mentee views regarding skills needed from mentors

Mentees also reflected that mentors needed to bring a "level of energy" and enthusiasm to the group, and that the mentoring role required a deftness in fostering peer to peer engagement:

> "The more I think about it, the more important it is, as an ingredient of the success of our group is actually the skill and the approach of the mentors, and how they were just so inclusive and so engaging, and really found that balance between when to contribute some expertise or some advice, and when to sit back and let us talk…"

Mentors were certainly helped by having a read-store of engaging approaches and activities:

> "… the variety of approaches and formats of discussion and sort of, you know, structures that they brought to us was really, really beneficial."

Greater support and resources could be offered to ensure all mentors have access to a set of 'tips and tricks' or options for drawing out mentee participation. This may also be aided by use of an associate mentor. The associate mentor was explicit in describing the importance of engagement techniques for mentors:

"I think it would be really worthwhile thinking about engagement technique, and what does it mean to create a quick community? How do you facilitate all that kind of forming norming group process stuff in an online environment quickly, so you can then leverage it for the six months… it's kind of creating a little bit of an artificial camaraderie, you know… [mentors] are kind of facilitating a process between the group members, rather than just like playing French cricket, where the mentor is the person holding the bat, and everyone else is throwing balls at them."

Recommendation: Provide mentors with a menu of options regarding activities, approaches and formats for discussion which have been effective for mentors in the past. Development of the menu could be undertaken in 2022, however the menu could be built over time.

Recommendation: Provide mentors with a pre-program meeting where advice and support could be offered regarding effective engagement techniques to encourage active participation and facilitate peer to peer relationship building in the online environment. The associate mentor from the 2021 program could be invited to lead this session, given their skills in this area.

EQ7: To what extent does the group model work?

There were significant differences between the four mentoring groups participating in the program. Key differences were identified in relation to:

- mentors' conception of their and the group's role (e.g. Was the mentor to be an instructor imparting knowledge or a 'guide on the side'? Was the group a community of practice or did it follow a more traditional mentor/mentee model?)
- the format of mentoring sessions (the activities undertaken and way in which the group time was structured)
- the knowledge and skills addressed, and the extent to which the content focus of the group was driven by mentors or mentees
- the rapport and 'chemistry' between mentors and mentees and between mentees as a group
- the use of a mentor and 'mentor apprentice' to provide dual support to the mentoring group, rather than use of a single mentor (one group only used the 'apprentice mentor' model, which was put in place relatively spontaneously when a mentee expressed a desire to take a leadership role in the group and to build their mentoring skills)
- the level of evaluation experience and knowledge amongst mentees in the group
- the demonstrated commitment of mentees to attending and participating in mentoring sessions
- approaches taken to administering and facilitating the group (the scheduling of sessions, establishment of a WhatsApp group etc.)

Variation across groups was an inevitable outcome of the different styles, personalities and preferences of mentors and mentees, and in many respects the diversity of approaches across groups was a strength of this program. Given the program was a pilot, program designers were keen to see a variety of approaches trialled and were not prescriptive about how mentors should go about delivering the program to their groups.

Group model a primary motive for participation

By the time the mid-point survey was conducted, it was evident to mentors that a key source of value for mentees was the opportunity to discuss evaluation issues with peers as well as a mentor:

> *'The mentees are very hungry for time and opportunity to meet peers and discuss evaluation issues, which the program offers. They have expressed this as their highest need. These meetings provide the opportunity to clarify their understanding of evaluation models and methods and to reaffirm their existing views. They tend to be the only evaluator in their organisation and so are isolated from interaction with peers. Guidance on key issues, access to key readings and feedback on ideas have also been very useful.'* (Mentor survey question 11)

When asked in the mid-point survey what they liked and disliked about the group mentoring model, a clear majority of mentees were positive in their comments. Mentees reflected that they were learning a great deal from others in the group: '[it] makes for a rich learning experience where we can share our different perspectives and experiences' (Mentee survey, Question 11). Many also enjoyed the group dynamic, noting that others 'asked a question or raised an issue I hadn't thought of', the dynamic was 'less intimidating' with a group and there was greater 'collegial support', and there were opportunities to learn from other mentees and build a professional network.

Focus group and interview feedback was consistently supportive of the group model. Mentees were highly positive about the model, which enabled them to benefit from the knowledge and insights of peers. A number of mentees reflected that it was specifically the group format that had attracted them to the program, and they would not have applied to participate in a one on one mentoring program:

> *"So I was really also just wanting to meet some peers working in similar roles"*

> *"So this was really attractive in terms of meeting people that had more sort of live experience and could share what they had learned and how all the theory kind of applied to their experiences running evaluation projects."*

The group model enabled mentees to access the knowledge, insights and practical advice of a number of peers, and to gain the benefits of articulating their ideas and giving advice to others:

> *"So even though the mentor kind of facilitated and often had more years of experience to share with us, everyone kind of had something that was valuable to the rest of the group."*

> *"I definitely got a lot out of the rest of the group's sort of stories about the people they worked with, through the course of different evaluation projects, because quite often we got to talking about how we sort of worked with stakeholders that might have been a bit more difficult, or how we made sure the results of our evaluation were used in something. And some of those sort of relational sides of evaluation quite a bit. And hearing other people's experiences in those sorts of scenarios was quite helpful for me."*

One mentee noted that they found the group discussions more relevant than they had expected:

> *"I was surprised by how directly relevant it was to the work that I was doing... I always got really practical takeaways, which I wasn't expecting from the group experience. I thought that, you know, there would be times when we're talking about things that aren't so relevant here or there, but I don't know, it was just really somehow managed to be really pitched at a good level."*

Impact of group model on mentoring power dynamic

The group model also resulted in a changed power dynamic so group members felt more at ease than they might in a one on one mentoring relationship:

> *"I think I've done individual mentoring before. And I've kind of found it a bit intense like it's, you know, it's very much directed on you and where you want to go in your career. And it's, whereas this felt like, it was a kind of a safe space to be, you know, to share with others in that kind of peer, it was as much about the peers as the mentor, I think, and I liked that aspect."*

> *"I think one other benefit for me, was having a comfortable space to ask dumb questions or slightly controversial questions."*

Accountability to a group motivated some mentees to prepare for sessions and to actively contribute:

> *"Having that accountability mechanism where it's like, you know, you were going to come together with others and talk about something would actually encourage you to do that reading."*

> *"I think that was probably the real benefit of it for me, was just the accountability of the group process and not in a kind of harsh accountability way. But in a positive looking forward to it, we've all put the effort in, and we're all going to enjoy it, kind of a group accountability process."*

Formation of communities of practice

A number of mentees noted that access to a professional network enabled them to overcome isolation and to access a much needed 'sounding board':

> *"Just getting access to more networks in the evaluation space has been hugely helpful, I think. Because it kind of feels especially given the remoteness of our work these days that we're all operating in isolation, we're very, we're a rare breed, monitors and evaluators, a very rare breed. So it's good to talk to others in the space. If, if that's a minimum value that you get from this, that's, I think that's good enough to me, and then everything else on top of that, is a bonus, and there have been a lot of bonuses, so I think, there's definitely value in it."*

At its best, the group format enabled the formation of communities of practice. Two mentoring groups have committed to continue to meet following the completion of the program, and this is testament to the value this form of peer engagement offered mentees. However,

In some groups, the group was not cohesive and some mentees felt opportunities to benefit from the group environment were missed:

> *"I felt in some respects, that there was the potential for the group to really become a community of practice. But for that, there needs to be really deep understanding of everybody's expertise, and a willingness to, you know, to share. Yeah, you know, it just doesn't happen."*

Some mentees attributed this failure for a strong group culture to form to the diversity of the group or a disparity in the experience level of group members; for others, it was related to the facilitation approach of the mentor:

> "I'd say the group mentoring, largely our interactions were in that vertical, you know, we had a question and the mentor, you know, talked a bit about it, asked our views. We certainly did share across each other a little bit, but I still think that we were, yeah the mentor was a big feature of the group. And so I don't feel like we've developed, you know, strong bonds across us as mentees."

A willingness to contribute actively is also required by group members. One mentor explained that not all mentees were comfortable providing peer advice or their own reflections, and this presented a challenge for the mentor:

> "[One mentee] tended to sit on the sidelines all the time, and very rarely would initiate a comment. So I actually used to reach out to her and say, Hey, what do you think about what so and so's just said, what's your experience with that? […] I'm not sure if it was a confidence thing, or what, but if I reached out to her, then she would talk. But if I left it to her, she wouldn't say anything."

One mentor described how they structured their mentoring sessions to help mentees get the most out of peer learning, recognising that "the group has got, you know, solutions within it". Members of this group:

> "…were able to raise problems in our group. And so each of them brought a problem on different days to say, here's what I'm struggling with in my job. And just articulating the problem, as we know, is really, really helpful. You just get to say it out loud and write it down. And you often see many answers by doing that. But they also got to chat with others about, people made suggestions, put them into touch on resources, talked with them out of session, and so on."

This kind of strategy for drawing active participation out of group members, and facilitating peer learning wherever possible, could be included in a menu of options to guide mentors embarking on the program.

Limitations of group model

While mentees identified a number of advantages associated with a group model, many also recognised that mentoring worked differently in the absence of a one on one relationship, commenting, for instance 'At times, it would be nice to be able to pick apart a problem I'm having, but it is difficult to do that in a group' (Mentee survey, Question 11). Mentees and mentors reflected that group mentoring 'doesn't support focussed individual goal setting as well as one on one would' (Mentee survey, Question 11).

Key finding: The group model of mentoring was strongly supported by mentees, who highly valued the opportunity to learn from peers as well as their mentor. Mentees found the group format less intimidating and enjoyed the collegial support and camaraderie that the group model entailed.

Key finding: The key limitation of the group model was that there was less capacity for mentees to 'drill down' with a mentor in relation to a specific career challenge or goal – however mentees consistently reflected that the group model offered more advantages than disadvantages.

Mentor reflections on group model

While some mentors were hesitant about how the group model would work, overall they were satisfied with the model. One mentor explained their initial scepticism about a group model:

> "I was a bit sceptical to be honest about whether it could work in a group. And there were some aspects that worked better than others. You know, just because it was a group, and because you've got a mix of people and ways in which they, they sort of interact. But I think, I think it was worth doing. And I'm taking the fact that they've continued as an indicator that it was useful to them too maybe more useful without me."

One mentor noted that a tool such as a self-assessment, and reflection on professional strengths and weaknesses, was well suited to a one on one mentoring scenario, it was less well suited to a group format:

> "So we did the self-assessment, but… we tried to go back to it but it didn't work. We didn't actually sit down and analyse it. And I think maybe that's a bit hard to do in a group where people may be a bit shy about, you know, saying how good they are or how bad they are or whatever. Whereas on a one on one mentee, mentoring, you could easily do that. So that may be a limitation of the group."

All mentors agreed that group mentoring necessitated a different approach to one on one mentoring:

> "It's not a transplant of one on one mentoring process to a group process, they are actually, I think, a little different."

> "If I was doing it one on one, […] the balance of time would be more on the getting to know you bit in the initial sessions, and then you know, less on the actual content. And then as time went on, you could, you know, you've got the relationship, so you can spend more time on the actual content. I don't think that happened in the same way in the group, I think we just had to get on with it. And hope that we'd, you know, we'd get to know each other and relate, sort of thing. But I mean, with different personalities, too, it's a bit more challenging for a mentor, I think."

Overall mentors unanimously supported the group model, and some viewed it as equally good or superior to a one on one model:

> "they got a lot more out of it than they would have gotten one on one with me."

> "Yeah. Like sharing their experiences, and you know, just being, just having the opportunity to discuss aspects of their work and all that kind of thing. I mean, I think that was, that was as valuable as me, maybe, you know, sort of giving them the benefits of my expertise [laughs]. So, yeah, I think it was just a sense of connection and learning together that I think worked quite well."

> "I really can't think of a negative."

> "I think it would be much less efficient [one on one], and they learned so much from each other."

Mentors observed that mentees certainly enjoyed connecting with one another:

> *"They certainly liked meeting other evaluators and feeling that they had something in common."*

> *"One of the points that I got from the feedback in light of my mentees group was that they do like the contact. And it doesn't matter what they're talking about. As long as they're connecting. Like that's, that's huge, you know, what they're talking about what they get out of it is important. But it's sort of second level of importance."*

> *"… then others say, this is the best, this is the best two hours of my month when we get together. So, you know, I didn't expect that at all. So I think that's great. And it's not me, it's the group just working so well together."*

Steering committee reflections on group model

The steering committee also recognised that the group model was significantly more efficient to deliver than a one on one model:

> *"We could have some efficiencies, we wouldn't need to find 20 mentors, to mentor 20 mentees. Because that would be really hard."*

A member of the steering committee reflected that the group model had a significant impact on the way in which mentoring was delivered. Groups tended to "focus on knowledge about particular things," while individual professional development became "more of a secondary aspect". A traditional one on one mentoring approach might address questions such as "how do I manage this? What do I do here? How do I manage this person?" but in the case of a group mentoring project, there is a need to recalibrate expectations about what mentoring is or should be.

Group chemistry

A number of mentors observed that group dynamic was important, but also that it was difficult to predetermine which groups would have 'chemistry':

> *"From my discussions just briefly with a couple of the other mentors the dynamics in each group sound like they're really, really different. Hugely different. [Another mentor's] group sounds more much more self-initiated than what mine is. I think. I have to do I think more prompting and offering of options and stuff that what, whereas his group more take the reins themselves and run with it is my impression. Maybe that's just a function of the personalities in the group? And I don't know how you sort of plan for that, quite frankly."*

> *"Yeah, I think if they were all from one, one sector, or one thing that they'd have probably been recognising the same things, but it was quite diverse. And I don't, I don't remember being aware of that at the, you know, when the group was being pulled together. So that was quite good."*

Steering committee members were aware of the importance of 'chemistry' to a positive group culture:

"I mean… what really makes it work for mentees is the personal relationship they build with that individual, regardless of their background. So if you've got if you've got somebody that you connect with, it works."

Key finding: While some mentors were initially sceptical about whether a group model would work, all mentors felt this approach was successful. Mentors did have to adapt their mentoring approach given the group format.

Recommendation: Retain the group model of mentoring.

RQ3: What were the unexpected outcomes relating to the design of the mentor program?

Mentees reported that unexpected outcomes relating to the design of the program were increased confidence, understanding that others also face similar struggles, having fun and gaining time for reflection.

Enjoyment

Some mentors and mentees noted that the program itself – and particularly the use of a group model - was very enjoyable, and that they had been surprised by how much enjoyment and energy they got out of the sessions:

"I was surprised by how much fun it was. Like we just genuinely had a good time."

"I just felt so motivated. I felt like I was in the right profession. And I really felt like much more confident and like ready to go and more enthused about my work after each session."

It is likely that the level of enjoyment mentees experienced was related to how actively they participated in mentoring sessions, the extent and ease of their interpersonal relationships with peers and the mentor, the kind of activities undertaken and the format of sessions, the facilitation skills of mentors and the power dynamic established, as well as the individual personalities and dispositions of group members.

Key finding: Key unexpected outcomes of the design of the online, group mentoring model were that mentees derived enjoyment and energy from connecting with peers and their mentor, and that mentees experienced greater time to reflect on their work as evaluators.

Synthesis rubric: Relevance

Extent to which the online, group mentoring model met the needs of the program participants

Standard	Definition – based on evaluation sub questions			Additional information – based on research questions	
Clearly relevant – a consistent story showing that the program design was relevant for meeting the needs of mentors and mentees	Evidence that all or almost all mentees supported the program design, including the approach taken to matching mentees and mentors, the orientation session, and use of an online and group mentoring model. ✓	A significant majority of comments – regarding the design of the mentoring model were positive.	Mentors consistently felt the design of the program was relevant for meeting mentor and mentee needs. ✓	Unexpected outcomes relating to the design of the program were consistently positive ✓	Key finding: To be effective in their role, mentors required self-reflection, facilitation, interpersonal and organisation skills, as well as a broad knowledge of evaluation theory and practice.
Mixed – In some respects the program design worked, but in other, significant respects or for a significant proportion of participants, it did not	Evidence that the experience of mentees was highly mixed in terms of whether the approach to matching and the online, group mentoring model met their needs.	Comments regarding the relevance of the model for meeting mentee and mentor needs were mixed. ✓	No more than two of four mentors felt the design of the model worked well.	Unexpected outcomes relating to the design of the program were both positive and negative	
Clearly not relevant – the program design failed to meet the needs of mentees of mentors	Evidence that most mentees did not support the program design, including the approach taken to matching mentees and mentors, the orientation session and the use of an online, group mentoring model.	Comments regarding the relevance of the program design for meeting mentee and mentor needs were consistently negative.	At least two mentors felt the program design did not work.	Unexpected outcomes relating to the design of the program were consistently negative	

Overall score

Overall, the program design is 'clearly relevant' for meeting the needs of program participants. While mentees and mentors identified limitations with the use of an online and group format, benefits were consistently seen to outweigh disadvantages. 'Mixed' comments in relation to the program design related primarily to the desire of many mentees for improved matching with peers. Unexpected outcomes associated with the program design were clearly positive – mentees derived enjoyment and a sense of camaraderie from the experience.

Business rules for determining overall scores are at Appendix 2.

Chapter 5: How worthwhile was the mentoring program in terms of time spent for stakeholders?

Summary

Overall, mentees, mentors and steering committee members who participated in the evaluation agreed the program was time well spent. The mentees were the most enthusiastic in their praise of the program. They reported that they were motivated and energised by the program; they built their confidence and professional identity as evaluators, and deepened their understanding of both underpinning theory and good evaluation practice. Mentors were required to commit a few hours a month to preparation and facilitation, but agreed that overall, the benefits of participation for most mentees made that time commitment worthwhile.

RQ4: To what extent do mentees and mentors think the program was time well spent?

Mentees use of time

When asked in the mid-point survey to what extent they felt that their time participating in the program was well spent, all mentee survey respondents agreed their time had been well spent (Mentee Survey Question 15). In describing in what ways, if any, they had benefited from participation in the program, mentees frequently cited:

- learning from others' experience

- accessing relevant resources

- enjoying specific time to think and be inspired

- gaining more thorough knowledge of theoretical and philosophical concepts and structures underpinning evaluation practice

- gaining a strong understanding of the evaluation sector, good practice and how to overcome common challenges

- gaining confidence as an evaluator

- the camaraderie and energy of connecting with other evaluators

Consistent with survey data, all mentees who participated in focus groups agreed that the program was time well spent. Agreement that participation in the program was time well spent was frequently enthusiastic:

> "We had a really strong sense of [being energized] afterwards. I just felt so motivated. I felt like I was in the right profession. And I really felt like much more confident and like ready to go and more enthused about my work after each session. So that was really nice. Time well spent."

Importantly, some mentees were observed to be disengaged during the program; as noted in the discussion of evaluation limitations (Chapter 2), they seem not to have participated in the evaluation. For these mentees, the program may not have been a good use of time. Participation

rate in the mentee focus groups was 50%, so we can say that at least 50% strongly agreed the program was worthwhile. One mentor reflected that not all participants in the program may have found it a good use of their time:

> "Yeah, I think for, not all of them because one effectively dropped out. So of the five, I'd say, three definite yeses, one 50 percent and one 0%."

The mentee who "effectively dropped out" did not participate in the focus groups.

Time quarantined for reflection

A key benefit for mentees was having time quarantined for reflection and discussion:

> "Just having time quarantined to just have a discussion… feels like a little bit of a luxury actually. And I think that sort of came through for everyone on my group… we would all be really quite energized… we have very demanding jobs, everyone's kind of overworked and we just would take an hour and a half once a month to just talk about, you know, we all love what we do… I think for me, it's helped me to sort of think through… about where to next for my career."

> "I found that it was having that space to actually step out of your day to day busyness and look at evaluation in quite a kind of critical, reflective way with others, that I just wouldn't get round to otherwise."

> "You just don't often have the time to do that sort of self directed stuff, you know, even if we really want to, it kind of never makes it to the top of the list when you've got work that you need to be doing for clients or whatever. So actually sort of enforcing that time and space and giving a reading on a topic that we'd all agreed was useful, I think was great. So like, I've read six, five papers this year, which I don't think I've ever done before since I did my masters."

One mentee, however, stated that generally participation in the program represented time well spent, but some topics were of low relevance:

> "I'm just, yeah, one or two sessions that topic wise, were kind of outside of the scope of the evaluation work that I do. But other than that, yeah, definitely."

If mentees were grouped with like-peers in future, it is anticipated this would have a positive impact in terms of the relevance of sessions.

Worthwhile use of time for mentors

In interviews, all mentors agreed that the program was time well spent for both themselves and their mentees. One mentor noted that some mentees did seem disengaged but most felt that mentees found the program a worthwhile experience. One mentor stated that the program doesn't have to have massive achievements to be worthwhile:

> "I think by and large, yes, they say at least enjoyed it, and maybe found it a bit helpful. And as I said, perhaps they got some encouragement, I wouldn't diminish that, doesn't have to be solving everything. If they walked away from you know, a six month group mentoring process, just feeling more encouraged in their work as an evaluator, I think that's good. I think it's a good outcome."

The encouragement and confidence boost many mentees experienced was valued by mentees who participated in focus groups - particularly for those feeling isolated in their profession, which was noted as a fairly common experience for evaluators.

Mentors varied in their level of preparation depending on the structure they adopted, with some preparing presentations and detailed agendas, and others leaving the structure looser with less preparation needed. Preparation time ranged from half an hour to several hours per session. Overall, the level of preparation could be adapted as the mentor saw as necessary. No mentors viewed the preparation time needed to invest as excessive. One mentor noted that the time commitment was much less intense than traditional teaching:

> "[It's] so much easier than teaching because you don't have to… assess any assignments. It's a really laidback approach to teaching and I've thoroughly enjoyed that part of it."

Mentors also benefited from participating in the program, and found it an enjoyable and engaging experience:

> "I enjoyed it, actually. They were a great group. And it was always kind of, I wonder what they're going to ask next, you know, kind of thing, like intriguing."

> "I do think it was certainly worth my time. And I enjoyed meeting the people in my group. And I found it beneficial to listen to their experiences and to be challenged a bit to see if I could drop or anything that helps."

> "I've loved it. I think it's been great fun. I've seen no negatives behind it. So I've had a great time."

> "Yeah, I enjoyed it. I learnt a few things, got to polish my facilitating skills."

One mentor reflected that the intellectual engagement with other evaluators had been welcome in the context of remote working:

> "I thought it would be intellectually interesting. It was sort of like looking forward to having some interesting meaningful peer discussions to chew around issues. And part of it is because of COVID. And I'm working from home and I have zoom meetings occasionally. But I don't have the same number of opportunities to have as substantive discussions, as I used to in the past, when I was working in an office with other people, so I thought oh, this could be good."

In focus groups, steering committee members observed that the program seemed to be time well spent for mentees:

> "Most of the feedback I was receiving from those people were really positive about how happy they were to be part of the group and how useful it was, it was to them. So there was a lot of good, good feeling there."

Committee members felt that, regardless of the outcomes of the program for participants, "we've learnt a lot from this, that we can use in the future".

Key finding: Mentees and mentors viewed participation in the program as time well spent. Mentees valued having time 'quarantined' for reflection and professional learning, learning from others, accessing resources, gaining confidence and developing their professional network.

RQ5: To what extent would mentees recommend the program to other AES members?

Mentees were not specifically asked if they would recommend it, but some said they would without being prompted:

> "So, so yeah, so yeah, I definitely recommend it."

> "I know that I certainly would recommend to colleagues if this was to continue to actually put in an application and do it because I just think it's really worthwhile to, to get that space to reflect on your practice. Rather than always be doing to actually reflect on it and think about, about the practice and whether there are other approaches or you know, that sort of thing that I just think it's a really, really good opportunity.

No mentees stated that they would not recommend the program to other AES members.

Mentors were not asked about whether they would recommend the program.

Outside of the evaluation, some mentees have been observed recommending the program.

Synthesis rubric: Worthwhile use of time

Extent to which the mentoring program was time well spent for stakeholders

Standard	Definition – based on evaluation sub questions			Additional information – based on research questions
Clearly worthwhile – all or almost all stakeholders viewed participation in the program as time well spent	Evidence that all or almost all mentees thought participation in the program was time well spent. ✓	A significant majority of comments regarding mentees' use of time were positive. ✓	Mentors consistently felt participation in the program was time well spent. ✓	Evidence that mentees would recommend the program to others.
Mixed – While some stakeholders viewed participation as time well spent, for some this was not the case	Program stakeholders expressed mixed views about whether participation was time well spent.	Comments regarding mentees' use of time were mixed.	No more than two of four mentors felt participation in the program was time well spent.	Mixed evidence regarding whether mentees would recommend the program.
Clearly not worthwhile – most stakeholders did not view participation in the program as time well spentr	Most stakeholders did not view participation in the program as time well spent.	Comments regarding mentees' use of time were consistently negative.	A majority of mentors felt participation in the program was not time well spent.	Evidence that most mentees would not recommend the program to others.
Unable to say	N/A	N/A	N/A	Insufficient evidence to make a judgement about whether mentees would recommend the program ✓

Overall score

Overall, the program represented a worthwhile use of time for stakeholders. Mentees identified a number of benefits relating to the program, including that the program enabled them to 'quarantine' time for reflection and professional learning. Mentors felt that, while they had to invest a few hours a month for preparation, the time commitment was not overly burdensome and the benefits for mentees and for themselves meant that their time participating was time well spent.

Business rules for determining overall scores are at Appendix 2.

Chapter 6: In its current form should the mentoring program be replicated?

Summary

All participants agreed that the program should be offered again, largely in its current form. While minor improvements were suggested, participants agreed that the core elements of the program, small groups of evaluators connecting with mentors using online tools for a fixed period, should be replicated. Key enablers which supported program implementation were: the online format, use of apps like *WhatsApp* to support scheduling and planning, and positive relationships between mentees and the mentor and other mentees. Key barriers were: scheduling (competing with work and other tasks), limitations regarding internet access and use of technology. Participants identified potential program improvements relating to group size, creation of groups around areas of interest, and providing additional information and support for mentors regarding techniques and strategies which promote engagement.

RQ6: What were the barriers and enablers to implementing the program in its current form?

Enablers

Overall, the online nature of the program was viewed by evaluation participants as a key enabler, overcoming geography and scheduling barriers. Multiple mentees noted that due to geography (living outside major cities) and other commitments, an in-person program would have been impossible to attend:

> *"So we really appreciated the way it was online. It made it much easier for us to actually participate. So thanks for considering Western Australia."*

Mentors also recognised the flexibility of the online format as a key enabler:

> *"Well convenience, you don't have to go anywhere you're sitting at your desk. So in terms of the time it takes, if people had to come to a venue, you know, if you're, if you're going to take a bite of time out of your working day, this is much more convenient."*

An additional minor enabler was the use of other technologies such as *WhatsApp* to support scheduling.

One mentee noted that the attitude of the mentor is a key enabler:

> *"I think it's the level of energy that the mentor has for it all is really important. So you know, it often succeeds or fails if they're not, not on their game."*

Indeed, a core driver of the success of the program was the relationships developed between the mentors and mentees, and between the mentees, and these varied group to group. As a member of the steering committee observed:

> *"What really makes it work for mentees is the personal relationship they build with that individual, regardless of their background. So if you've got if you've got somebody that you connect with, it works. And you well I'm extrapolating from very, very small backs. But what I what I was the tendencies I saw were that within a group, a small number, connected very strongly with the mentor, and that varied from group to group too."*

Mentees noted that other professional development opportunities can be cost prohibitive, and that accessing the mentoring program for free was valuable:

> *"I was so excited when I got selected because I feel like it was a real gift to have someone, you know, if I had to pay for the time that my, you know, his professional time of what he's contributed that would have cost me a fortune. So I feel like, it's hugely, it's been hugely generous of them to volunteer their time and expertise and be so generous with sharing their knowledge."*

> *"Yeah, I have to agree. I'm very grateful for our mentors' time, and also the energy of the committee who dreamt up this, I think it's been really valuable."*

Barriers

Scheduling was a minor barrier for mentees, mentors and steering committee members, who sometimes struggled to find mutually agreeable times to meet, and to complete needed work (e.g. readings). There may be benefit in future in scheduling all sessions, including 'offline' meetings between mentors at the commencement of and throughout the program, to ensure dates can be put in diaries at the earliest opportunity.

Technology difficulties or access to good internet connectivity were also identified as a barrier for some participants, and one mentee noted that the format may present accessibility issues for some mentees or prospective mentees:

> *"I wonder, I'm not affected myself, but if anyone had sort of a visual or hearing impairment, that could be a bit of a limitation for them, applying and being involved. Not sure how, how significant, you know, like, what, if it's a large proportion of people, but I imagine that would be a barrier."*

Key finding: Key enablers for effective delivery of the program were the online format, positive relationships between mentors and mentees, and that the program was free. Key barriers were scheduling challenges and technology difficulties.

Recommendation: Schedule all sessions and 'offline' meetings between mentors at the earliest opportunity, to ensure dates can be put in diaries.

Continuing to offer the program

In focus groups, mentees were unanimous in their support for running the program again. When asked whether the program should run again, responses were succinct:

> *"Absolutely."*

> *"Definitely."*

No mentee disagreed that the program should run again. Some mentees identified that there could be issues with sustainability if the same mentors were needed on a recurring basis. Some

opportunities for improvement were noted (see below) but no major changes were identified. Overall, mentees were very positive about their experiences:

> *"I reckon it's been a raging success from my experience."*

Mentors stated that the program worked well, and they see value in continuing it:

> *"I think it's worked well. And I think the AES should pat itself on the back for having set it up so well and run it so professionally. I'd be really disappointed if we didn't continue it, because then we've done all the hard work now and now repeating it is hopefully much easier than to do"*

> *"And we should continue it on because we've done the groundwork's done, let's get on with it. And let's roll it out into the future."*

Some mentors were also in favour of expanding the program.

> *"Whether we expand it. I don't know, it's really an AES question, I guess four seems a reasonable number to run at any one time. But there's no reason, it's not really any more resource heavy to run eight. Yeah, I guess I'm not sure, there seems to be a demand. So yeah, I, certainly it should run again, whether it expands? Probably people like Julie and David have a better view of that than I do. They know how much work went in behind the scenes"*

Mentors noted that people had missed out on the pilot:

> *"There certainly was a demand there from the initial batch. And there were people who missed out and yeah, absolutely."*

When this question was raised with the steering committee, there was some caution about expanding the program too quickly. In its current form, it had been 'manageable'; expansion of the program would need to take into account additional workload.

One mentor had noted that the program didn't completely meet expectations, but nonetheless thought it should continue:

> *"Um didn't quite go how I was expecting before I started, but it was useful. Something I believe the AES should continue doing. And we'll just have to refine it a little bit as we go, learn from experience."*

Like mentees and mentors, members of the steering committee supported continuation of the program. It was noted that much of the work had now be done and could be further leveraged by continuing to run the program:

> *"Yeah just awareness of, perhaps there's a lot of intense work at the beginning, Fran did an enormous job on putting together the program guidelines. And she, she was able to do that at the beginning."*

It was recognised, however, that the program could be improved as a result of some "tweaking". Members supported the way the pilot had been implemented with a genuine openness and commitment to ongoing learning and improvement:

> *"I want to use a hackneyed phrase, one of the approaches we've taken has been about continuous improvement. In a very real sense. And I think if we're going, I'd like us to*

continue. And I'd like us to continue to have that approach. We're learning and we're learning from people. Yeah. And hopefully, the people that we're working with are learning as well."

Key finding: Mentees and mentors unanimously agreed that the program can and should be offered again.

RQ7: What modifications would be needed (if any) in the current program to replicate it?

When asked in the mid-point survey what they would like changed about the program, mentees suggested the following possible improvements:

- improved matching of mentees 'based on background, current job role and what they want out of the program'
- facilitate some way for mentees to have a one-on-one engagement, perhaps through the ability to request one-on-one sessions
- an expectation of some paired work, to support mentees to progress goals, build relationships and actively engage with the program
- greater clarification of program purpose
- potentially increasing the number of mentors
- greater support for mentors, through creation of a 'master list of group activities' (e.g. discuss an article, review an evaluation, present a current challenge you face) and through opportunities to meet with other mentors

Grouping around common interests or sectors

As noted above, a critical area where a number of mentee focus group participants felt improvement could be made was in the matching of mentees with peers with whom they shared more in common:

> *"I certainly think I would have gotten more out of it, if the other people in the group had more similar roles. [...] I think similar roles would have enriched the experience for me, I think we could have bounced a lot more ideas around if that had been the case."*

> *"I think that's the key thing I think needs to be worked on, is the matching of the mentees within the group."*

Expanding on this, some mentees noted the potential to deliberately form groups around specific topics or roles:

> *"I think one of the main advantages was, I guess, the ability to put together groups that are not based on geography. They're based on some other sort of commonality. And it sounds like there could be potential for more of that, right. So you could potentially have someone who is, works in the public sector, managing evaluation units, and that they've done that for a while, and they're a mentor around that particular thing. And then it could be a group of people who work in public sector evaluation units, why not?"*

> *"I think there's huge potential for having mentoring groups that are around particular segments, if you like. For those who want that."*

> *"It'd be really interesting, wouldn't it to have almost like a smorgasbord of options online. Of these are the different mentor groups on different topics. This is who the mentors and the mentees kind of sign up to the one they're interested in, you know, so that you can pick and choose, and maybe they are only over a few, a few sessions. So it's quite a topic specific type or a particular theme or a particular group, rather than a long term, ongoing one. And, you know, they kind of become active when enough people have signed up or something. I don't know, it'd be quite an interesting way of doing it."*

One mentee reflected that they differed in experience level with the other members of their group, and as a consequence weren't able to develop the peer network they had hoped to develop:

> *"I also found that I was probably more experienced than some of the others in the group. And so that meant that I wasn't, I didn't really get that peer aspect that I was looking for. I felt like I gave quite a lot of advice and support to others, but wasn't necessarily able to get that from the others as much. I mean, the mentor was different. Obviously, he's got a lot of experience and certainly gave that. But yes, I didn't really come away with that peer network that I'd necessarily hoped for."*

This was one area where a number of mentees suggested the program should be tweaked: "If I was going to design the project, myself, I'd probably do almost exactly what AES did, except for that matching [with the groups]".

Group size

In the mid-point survey, while some mentees suggested smaller groups (2/3 participants) would work better, others suggested 'it would be good to have a slightly larger group of mentees, to take account of the fact that not all can attend'. In focus groups, one mentee explained that a larger group would allow for the critical mass needed for discussion:

> *"I do feel like our group could have benefited from being a bit bigger. We almost, we struggled to maintain the discussion, we had a couple of people in our group that either weren't available all the time, or when they were available, they were kind of multitasking with other work and weren't necessarily really active I also found that I was probably more experienced than some of the others in the group. And so that meant that I wasn't, I didn't really get that peer aspect that I was looking for. I felt like I gave quite a lot of advice and support to others, but wasn't necessarily able to get that from the others as much. I mean, the mentor was different. Obviously, he's got a lot of experience and certainly gave that. But yes, I didn't really come away with that peer network that I'd necessarily hoped for"*

> *"And so sometimes they would only really be two of us, maybe a third. And I do wonder if there were just a few extra people in the group, it would have been a bit more fun, a bit more engaging, it felt like quite, not hard work but, it wasn't an easily flowing conversation all the time. And so I do wonder whether the groups could be a bit bigger."*

It seems likely that the ideal number of participants will vary depending on the mentoring approach: if the approach is highly goal-focussed, smaller groups may be preferable, but if the approach is to facilitate conversation, a 'critical mass' of participants is needed.

It is notable that only members of the groups which had members 'drop out' identified group size as an issue. In groups where five to six members attended throughout the program, group size was not identified as a problem.

Recommendation: Consider forming slightly larger groups, to allow for some mentees being unable to attend sessions, or have a 'waiting list' of mentees – if a mentee drops out of the program or consistently does not attend, additional members could join the group.

Program length

While some mentees felt the six month duration of the program was "about right," others felt the program would be strengthened were it extended to eight, ten, twelve or event eighteen months. Mentees suggested that, were the program to run over a longer period, there could be multiple entry points, with mentees exiting or joining the group at a range of points in time:

> "… if a group is reducing in size, that there's another expression of interest to join this particular group that goes out and so that there's a way to keep the group dynamics ticking along, but refreshing and renewing potentially as well, if there's need."

Mentors also considered program lengths:

> "Six months is not bad. Two months, is too short. Anywhere upwards of three months to six months, I think, is about right."

> "I don't know what the ideal length is. But I'm confident in saying certainly not less than six months."

Two mentoring groups have expressed an intention to continue meeting, without a mentor. However, this desire to continue meeting for longer than six months may not be generalizable for all groups, and one mentor noted that in cases where groups "don't work", a program that is running for a year may need to fold, which is "not a positive outcome". Another option is for groups to continue to meet of their own accord beyond six months, if they wish, or to give a group an option to extend for a further six months as part of the program.

Recommendation: Trial extending duration of the program to eight – ten months.

Recommendation: Encourage mentees to establish ways of connecting – such as via a WhatsApp group – so they can continue to engage as a community of practice beyond the program's duration, if they wish.

Continuation of group meetings beyond the program

Some mentees described their group's intention to continue to meet (without a mentor):

> "We've decided to continue meeting. Because we found … it to be good to share ideas with each other and have those… theoretical discussions and find out ways that people are doing things and different approaches."

> "Everybody in our group were keen to carry on. So we'll be hopefully probably meeting every monthly, still. So a person in our group will be responsible every month for setting up a meeting. And that will be without the mentors. So yeah, she's already removed herself from our WhatsApp group. So it's just us in our group now… hopefully, we kind of have like a mini kind of community of practice. So we'll see how it goes."

> *"And we did have a chat about whether the group wanted to just maintain our once a month catch up. And everyone's actually been very keen to do that. So even if it's sort of not part of this actual program, was off our own bat, said, we'd like to kind of continue it. And also we're quite open to kind of merging that or like with other groups, if they were interested in doing that."*

> *"I'm hoping that we can keep it going as a community of practice, for a long time. Because that's just like, that's a really useful, supportive, professional thing to have, and to be able to do."*

However, some groups did not have strong enough connections to want to continue to meet:

> *"I guess it didn't happen a lot in our group, we certainly didn't really have any interaction outside of the monthly meetings, or any kind of one on one interactions with each other. I guess, it's probably a mix of personalities, and the setup of the sessions. Quite a few of the people in my group were reasonably quiet. I think naturally, they like they would talk when asked to or, but they didn't, you know, it wasn't a really lively discussion. And, yeah, we would kind of go through the session, and then we'd say goodbye. And then we've meet again in a month's time, so there wasn't any WhatsApp group or any kind of interaction outside of that."*

> *"I don't think we really had enough cohesion for it to have legs beyond, although there have been certainly a few emails back and forth regarding opportunities or resources or, you know, just thinking things through."*

For some, this was due to limited commonality in the group:

> *"In my group, it was, it was definitely good in the sessions, we all had plenty to say and got along quite well. But yeah, I think just because of the difference in what we were there for in sort of our professional interests and focus, I don't see us really staying in contact... we just work very differently in terms of what we're evaluating and the role we play in evaluation. So it probably just wouldn't be valuable to us."*

It does seem that use of a WhatsApp group in parallel to the Zoom sessions supported mentees to engage with one another and to develop a kind of community of practice.

Mentors viewed groups choosing to continue as a marker of success.

> *"To me, that would be a sign of something that's worked really well if the mentees got together to become self-sustaining."*

> *"And I'm taking the fact that they've continued as an indicator that it was useful to them too maybe more useful without me."*

> *"They've kind of got their wings and their flying in formation now. So that's good."*

> *"My group wants to keep meeting."*

One mentor did not think ongoing connection was relevant:

> *"… maybe one or two of them have continued to be in touch with each other. I'm not sure that it really matters that much. I mean, the offer was always a short term, group mentoring experience. It wasn't lifelong buddies, ongoing coaching. And I think everybody entered it in that spirit. It was let's dive in and do it for a while, get what we can. And that's all good, you know, everybody then goes on. So I don't know that I want to mess with that too much. I think it becomes a lot of other things."*

In a contrasting view, however, the associate mentor felt that it was important to establish at the outset of the program whether the goal was to build a long-term self-sustaining community of practice, because this would influence the mentor's approach to facilitation:

> *"if the goal is to create the glue [between mentees] that lasts longer than the duration of the mentoring program. Like, if that's the goal, then you would start with that in mind. And I didn't really get a sense that that was the goal. I got the sense that that was a potential unintended positive consequence. Cool, cool, great. But I think if that now, is something that the AES would like to be a product of the mentoring program, then [facilitation techniques in the virtual environment] is this skill set [that needs to be] in the toolkit available to the mentors to do that."*

This is consistent with the views of one mentor, who described how their facilitation style was influenced by wanting to nudge the group toward a self-sustaining community of practice, which ultimately did occur:

> *"Well, that's kind of, was sort of what I was hoping for, but didn't want to expect. Because I deliberately ran it in a way that didn't put me completely in charge. If you see what I mean, it was kind of more facilitation in terms of the actual process of the group, than me leading it, but then I suppose that's my style of leadership anyway, I kind of feel like I'm in service of people, not the other way around. So anyway, I thought that was a good result. From my perspective."*

Steering committee members also observed that this mentor was intentional in fostering a peer network amongst mentees, and that this impacted significantly on the experience of mentees:

> *"… they were setting the whole thing up for participation right from the get go… [They] knew that we have to set it up [for participation] to happen, set up the conditions…"*

Recommendation: Consider whether development of a self-sustaining community of practice is a goal of the program and, if so, make this explicit to mentors and mentees and provide guidance and support to mentors regarding facilitation of a peer network. Groups may also be encouraged to serve as conduits onto other AES groups and projects.

Session format

Mentees reflected, in both the mid point survey and focus groups, that the kinds of engagements offered to mentees could be more varied – the program would be strengthen if it included an option for one on one check ins, "or some way to kind of do work outside of the meeting to kind of build on the evaluative capacity, other than just reading theory, or articles." Some structures, like the 'bring a problem' model, where mentees came to sessions with a particular challenge they wanted to 'workshop' with the group, were universally well regarded and mentees thought this should feature in every group.

During the focus groups, some mentees became aware that other groups were run differently. Mentees wanted to know about other options that worked in other groups, so they could adopt those structures.

> *"I think it would be really helpful, sort of towards the beginning to provide groups with ideas of what the previous year or what previous groups have found useful, whether that's to do with the format. So you know, hearing the format that [the other] group had, like hearing different examples of what the format might be, would be useful, hearing what topics different groups have discussed, would be really useful as well, just you know, because if you're thinking about what you what topic, it would be nice to have just some ideas that you can look through would also be really helpful at the beginning."*

> *"There have been, you know, some different formats or structures or processes that have been used. If you could sort of like harvest, you know, three or four of the commonly used, or the most valued ones, by group members, that the mentors could actually suggest, well, here are a few different ways that they've approached it in the past, we can choose one of these."*

One mentor also reflected that improvements could be made to the format of the program, including providing some opportunity for mentees to meet face to face, if they can:

> *"So I think all things being equal, my suggestion would be to structure in a face to face meeting."*

Indigenous mentors

Mentors noted that Indigenous mentors would be beneficial for some.

> *"we didn't have any Indigenous mentors, did we, predominance of white males, right."*

However, the burden on individuals was also noted:

> *"But I guess the other, the other side of that is as a mentee side, but from the mentor side, because there are still relatively few, let's just take these sort of Indigenous evaluation people, because there are relatively few, they often get, you know, big expectations on them to participate in this, that and the other, you know, so they're, they're doing 10 times as much as we'd have to, because there are more of people like us. So you have to be mindful of that, not placing huge burdens, because sometimes it's hard to say, No. If you're asked to help, you know, younger Aboriginal evaluators, that it would be hard for a person in a leadership role to say no. So it's just being mindful of that, I think."*

As noted above under 'Barriers', a mentee also questioned whether the program was accessible and inclusive for people with hearing or vision impairments.

Recommendation: Consider cultural and other forms of inclusivity, as well as accessibility for people with hearing or vision impairments, when selecting mentors and establishing groups.

Use of associate mentors

Of the four mentoring groups, the strength of positive feedback in relation to one group is particularly notable. Focus group and interview data suggest this can be attributed to two factors: the use of a master and apprentice model of mentoring, and a session format and activities which elicited high levels of participation and engagement.

The master and apprentice model involved an 'apprentice' (less experienced) mentor coming on board to assist a 'master' (more experienced) mentor to run mentoring sessions. Focus groups reported that the 'chemistry' between the mentors and between the mentors and mentees was very strong – there was a strong culture of collaboration built within the group. Use of an apprentice mentor also disrupted the power imbalance that can exist with a mentor/mentee dynamic. The apprentice mentor was able to 'bounce ideas' with the master mentor and other mentees, and both mentors had an individual style that was focused on engagement and relationship building, including the use of humour to create a less formal environment and support participation.

The master-apprentice model has the additional advantage of generating mentors for future programs: the apprentice mentor, having gained experience through one round of the program, would be well prepared to act as a master mentor in the next. In addition, mentees benefit from two distinct areas of expertise and skill sets; in this sense mentees get 'two for one'. And the two mentors have the opportunity to spread the workload and responsibilities of mentorship between themselves, and for one to stand in if the other cannot attend a session.

Key finding: In the one mentoring group where it was used, the 'apprentice mentor' model was effective; the extent to which this is due to the model itself, and the extent to which it is due to the particular personalities and capabilities in this particular group, is unclear.

Recommendation: Consider use of the master-apprentice model for future iterations of the mentoring program.

Some mentees noted that sustainability may become an issue and had suggestions around reducing the burden on mentors. Noting the use of an associate mentor in one group, a mentee suggested:

> *"And why couldn't you as a, you know, as a as a mentoring scheme, why not set it up? Such that one of the goals is to expand the mentoring capacity, not just expand the evaluation capacity, but make it self-reinforcing."*

Without being aware that the associate mentor model had been used, another mentee suggested:

> *"I see that there's opportunity for some of the mentees to become semi mentors, if that makes sense so to be able to think about where you're at in terms of your competencies to have specific focus areas. […] potentially building so it's a sustainable model, bringing some people on, so it's not just requiring mentors to be, you know, the more senior folk just to always be it, but to be able to have some different focus points, you might be able to bring some others on, and then have them being mentored, of course, about their mentorship, you know, so just maybe have the senior folk being able to, the more junior mentors being able to touch base if there's a problem with their role as a mentor."*

Mentors also supported the use of an associate mentor:

> *"I think that's a brilliant idea. It a) gives the mentor one and support, but b) it's a way of mentor too easing into the process. I think that's quite clever."*

"I guess I would argue, strategically, it would be nice to keep it to the fellows for the next few years. But I also see that that would keep out people like Duncan, which is stupid. So maybe the fellows, maybe we should put it to the fellows seeking volunteers, but not be exclusive to the fellows. If that makes sense. I just think it's something they should be doing. And this is where they, you know, give back and boost your ego, it does all kinds of wonderful things. And why wouldn't you do it?"

"it would be interesting to see whether we can develop a link between the mentoring and the CPE Master's Course or postgraduate courses."

Engaging activities and resources and support for mentors

The second factor which stood out in relation to this particularly effective mentoring group was the use of innovative, highly engaging activities to elicit active participation of mentees. For example, games were used to draw out the participation of all mentees and to make sessions enjoyable and engaging. One game for instance saw mentees nominate a sentence in a journal article that they liked; all other mentees had to suggest why they felt this sentence was favoured, before the original mentee explained their selection.

Naturally each mentor has their own style and preferences, and there are many ways to run a mentoring group successfully; indeed, another group which had a highly unstructured and free flowing approach to mentoring sessions also received very positive feedback from mentees. While it is not recommended that these types of activities should necessarily be provided by all mentors, a 'menu of options' in terms of effective engagement strategies and activities could usefully be offered to all mentors. This would enable mentors can learn from experience what has worked well in the past for eliciting participation and help mentors to generate ideas about how best to run their sessions.

One mentor identified a need for more contact between mentors so they can share what is working and advise/support each other. Another noted that mentors would benefit from better feedback about whether what they were doing was working:

"I would initiate a discussion at the end of the session. How did today go? What worked well, what didn't? What do we do differently next time? And maybe it's part of a power dynamic, but people were very reluctant to give me negative feedback. And so you could say, oh, they're happy as Larry or they could say, nah, they don't want to say that because it might annoy me. And I don't know the answer to that to this day."

"I learned a few things got to polish my facilitating skills. But I had this slight unease on the feedback loop to myself on what I could do differently or better next time. Because some of the other, because my group functioned differently than some of the others. And that makes me wonder, should I have done something differently? And I literally don't know the answer to that."

Recommendation: Consider anonymous pulse-checks (e.g. 5 minute anonymous online surveys) to provide mentors and program organisers with greater feedback about how the program was travelled and any improvements that could be made.

Resource library

A number of focus group participants noted that a benefit of participation in the program was access to evaluation resources and templates that were shared by mentors and/or peers. As a resource for future mentors and mentees, it was suggested that the AES could house some kind of online resource library that could be accessed by program participants or by all AES members. Such a resource library, which would grow over time, would complement the group mentoring program and enable mentees to derive even greater value from the program.

Recommendation: Consider establishment of an online resource library where mentors and/or mentees could access evaluation resources and templates to support mentoring sessions and to provide mentees with an additional resource so that they can improve their evaluation practice.

Administration and facilitation of the group

Focus group and interview data suggests that effective delivery of the program was facilitated by a number of simple administrative practices that could be adopted by all mentors in the future. These include: establishment of all future session dates and times in the first session, clear responsibility regarding who is responsible for creating zoom meetings and sending invites (typically the mentor), and creation of a WhatsApp group for mentees. In particular, focus group participants highly valued the WhatsApp group, which enabled mentees to connect with one another out of sessions and to post questions and answers to each other, share resources and stay in touch beyond the program.

Key finding: Possible improvements to the program include: improved matching of mentees with peers; opportunities for one on one engagement between mentees and between mentees and the mentor; modifications to group size or entry-points; clarifying the program purpose; creating an online resource library; considering use of associate mentors; considering ways in which the program can be made more culturally inclusive; and providing greater resources and support for mentors regarding engaging facilitation strategies.

Evaluation approach

A number of improvements could be made to the evaluation approach to increase rigour and deliver greater insight about the efficacy of the program. As discussed above, a key assumption underlying the program logic – that the setting and pursuit of goals would be critical to the success of the program - was found to be incorrect. In the context of the insights gained through the evaluation of the pilot, the program logic can be further refined, and new hypothesis may be established regarding the impact of this program and of group, online mentoring programs more generally.

Consider a number of improvements to the evaluation approach, including revision of the program logic and evaluation framework, a modified approach to the use of surveys throughout the program, and early scheduling of focus group sessions.

Synthesis rubric: Replicability

Extent to which the model in its current form should be implemented again

Standard	Definition – based on evaluation sub questions	Additional information – based on research questions	
Clearly replicable – Most program stakeholders agree that the program should be run again in its current form	Program stakeholders consistently agree the program should be run again, largely in its current form. ✓	Mentees identified a number of enablers and barriers to successful delivery of the program.	Mentees identified a number of possible improvements to the program.
Mixed – Program stakeholders expressed mixed views about whether the program should be run again	Program stakeholders expressed mixed views about whether the program should be run again, largely in its current form.		
Clearly not replicable – Most program stakeholders agree that the program shouldn't be run again in its current form	Program stakeholders consistently agree the program should not be run again.		

Overall score

Overall, the program is 'clearly replicable'. Program stakeholders consistently agreed that the program offers value for participants and should be run again.

Key enablers for effective delivery of the program were the online format, positive and productive relationships between mentors and mentees, and that the program was free. Key barriers were scheduling challenges and technology difficulties.

Possible improvements to the program included: improved matching of mentees with peers, considering opportunities for one on one engagement between mentees and between mentees and the mentor, considering modifications to group size, clarifying the program purpose, including whether establishment of self-sustaining communities of practice is a goal, creating an online resource library, considering use of the associate mentor model, considering ways in which the program can be made more culturally inclusive, and providing greater resources and support for mentors regarding engaging facilitation strategies.

Business rules for determining overall scores are at Appendix 2.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

Synthesis rubric for overall performance

Overall, this program performed well against the four Criteria of Merit:

Criteria of Merit	Grading		
Effectiveness	Clearly effective	Mixed	Clearly not effective
Relevance	Clearly relevant	Mixed	Clearly not relevant
Worthwhile use of time	Clearly worthwhile	Mixed	Clearly not worthwhile
Replicable	Clearly replicable	Mixed	Clearly not replicable

It is notable that there were a number of unexpected findings of this evaluation which do not necessarily align directly with Key Evaluation Questions. For this reason, the rubric above should be read alongside the summaries of program strengths and weaknesses (below) and the evaluation key findings and recommendations (pages 3-4), to get a more complete picture of how the program was experienced and what can be learned to inform program improvement.

Strengths

The evaluation identified a number of strengths of the program, which are listed below.

Strengths
Participant matching – support for matching with expert mentors as well as small groups of likeminded individuals with a shared enthusiasm for evaluation
Orientation session – orientation clarified the purpose of the program and enabled important 'housekeeping' for the program before mentoring sessions commenced
Online format – more people, across a range of locations, had the opportunity to participate, and attending sessions was easy without needed a commute
Group format – opportunity to learn from others' experience and insights; support each other with challenges and build a professional network; building relationships was key to participants' experience of fun and enjoyment
Content focus – content driven by mentee needs and interests; opportunities to further theoretical and methodological understanding as well as learn from practical examples.
Skill of mentors in facilitating sessions – Very dedicated mentors who actively support and tailor the program for our interests, and skillfully facilitate conversations; it is a strength that groups have the flexibility to shape their sessions in line with their needs
Access to literature – many mentees appreciated the opportunity to access and engage with key resources and materials, such as journal articles, which expert mentors, and other mentees, were able to share

Building confidence – The opportunity to 'compare notes' and focus on best practice and challenges shared by participants enabled mentees to build their professional confidence

Overcoming isolation – bring evaluators together, especially when they are the only or one of few evaluators working in their organisation

Carving out time – Mentees enjoyed having time that was 'protected' for reflecting and delving deep into their evaluation practice.

Support from program organisers – implementation support from AES Pathways Committee was identified by mentors as critical

Free – mentees valued that participation was free, and this supported accessibility and equity

Some of the groups are intending to continue to meet as a community of practice, using platforms such as *WhatsApp*. This suggests the program has been successful in supporting mentees to effectively network with other evaluators and to enjoy longer term benefits as a result of their participation in the program.

Weaknesses

Mentees, mentors and steering committee members identified a number of areas which they perceived as weaknesses of the program. These could be tweaked in order to deliver greater benefit to participants.

Weaknesses

Commonality with peers – some mentees felt mismatched with their peers and would have preferred to be grouped with those with whom they have more in common – due to their evaluation experience or their professional interests (e.g. community-based, shoe-string evaluations vs large, government funded evaluation programs)

Some groups lacked 'chemistry' – due to individual personalities, consistency of attendance, structure and activities in mentoring sessions, and privacy concerns impeding discussion

Lack of structure – while some mentees appreciated an unstructured approach, others would have preferred a more structured and pre-planned 'program' of topics and activities, or a menu of topics or provocative questions which groups could draw upon

Unclear expectations – some mentors felt mentees were looking to be 'taught, not mentored'; responsibilities of mentors and mentees could have been made more explicit at the program outset; responsibility for organisation and administration of sessions was not always clear

Program length – some mentees felt they had 'just got started' and were enjoying good momentum when the program ended

No one-on-one time with mentor – limited capacity for mentees to progress individual goals, 'dive in deep' regarding a particular project or issue, and build a strong relationship with their mentor

Appendices

1. Program logic

Need

AES members needing ongoing professional career and skills development

Inputs

Committee organising the program

Mentees

Online platform

Mentors

Activities

Mentoring Pilot-Program Guide developed

Process for identifying mentors

Mentee application process

Mentee selection and matching process

Orientation process for mentors and mentees

Initial meeting to discuss and set expectations

Ongoing monthly meetings

Outputs

Mentoring Pilot-Program Guide

Mentees who completed the pilot-program

Individual goals set

Groups that met

Group goals set

Mentors who completed the pilot-program

Short-term Outcomes

Mentees have set and worked towards relevant personal goal and contributed to a group goal

Mentees prepared for meetings and willingly shared challenges, insights and experiences with the group

Mentors facilitated learning and application of critical problem-solving skills by mentees

Mentors served as role models, shared insights, listened objectively, acted as sounding boards

Longer-term Outcome

Mentees have increased relevant skills and knowledge

Mentees develop a reflective, professional development practice

Mentees have a peer support group and community of practice

Mentors have increased confidence and skills in guiding mentees in their professional development

Impact

Strengthened capacity and professionalism of AES evaluators

Increased professionalisation of evaluation sector in Australia

Assumptions

- Group, online-mentoring is an effective mentoring model
- Mentees are interested in an online, group mentoring program as a way of developing skills and deepening knowledge
- There are experienced, evaluation fellow interested to act as mentors
- Mentors have necessary skills and experience needed to mentor emerging evaluators
- It will be possible to match needs of mentees to skills and experience of mentors
- Mentors and mentees will be committed to all 6 mentoring sessions and associated activities

External Factors

Other training and skills building activities that mentees are involved in

KEQ 1 How well did the pilot program perform in advancing mentees skills and knowledge in evaluation?

KEQ 2 Is the online, group model appropriate for meeting the needs of the mentoring program?

KEQ 3 How worthwhile was the mentoring program in terms of time spent for stakeholders?

KEQ 4 In its current form should the mentoring program be replicated?

2. Synthesis rubric business rules

Business Rule	Traffic lights				Finding
1	🟩	🟩	🟩	=	🟩
2	🟩	🟩	🟧	=	🟧
3	🟩	🟧	🟥	=	🟥

1. When the performance is good (green) against all performance indicators, overall CoM performance is graded as good.
2. When performance against one or more performance indicator is mixed (orange), but performance against no indicator is found to be poor (red), overall CoM performance is graded as mixed.
3. When performance against one or more performance indictor is poor (red), overall CoM performance is graded as poor.
4. All performance indicators are considered equal weight.
5. Only performance indicators relating to KEQs are included in forming a judgement about the COM's performance against the standards; data relating to research questions is presented on the rubrics as contextual information only.

3. Data collection table

Data collection method	Data collection tool	Timing	Sampling and population	Analysis strategy
Document review	N/A		N/A	N/A
Survey - Mentees	Web-based survey (Survey Monkey)		Survey was sent to entire population of mentees and mentors (X people) X% response rate	SurveyMonkey data exported to excel and analysed
Survey - Mentors	Web-based survey undertaken on SurveyMonkey using AES account. The survey had 19 questions and took approximately 20 minutes to complete.	Data was collected between 29 April 2021 and 7 May 2021.	The survey was sent to all four mentors. The response rate was four out of four (100%). Data was collected in identified form (as per survey instruction page and invite email)	
Focus group discussion - Mentees	Online focus group and transcription	July 2021	Four focus group discussions were conducted with mentees. Due to last minute apologies, focus groups had low attendance: one had three attendees, one two attendees, one one attendee (effectively this was an interview).	Thematic data coding using NVivo
Focus group discussion – AES Pathways Committee	Online focus group and transcription	July 2021	AES Pathways Committee	Thematic data coding using NVivo
Semi-structured interviews - mentors	Online focus group and transcription	July 2021	All four mentors	Thematic data coding using NVivo

4. Data collection framework

Evaluation/Research Question	Performance Indicator	Data Collection Method	Analysis Method
KEQ1: How well did the program perform in helping mentees develop their self-identified skills and knowledge in evaluation?			
EQ1 To what extent did setting goals at group and individual level occur and how were these progressed?	# of goals mentees set # of group goals set in each mentoring group - Extent to which mentees set individual goals - Extent to which groups set group goals - Extent to which individual goals were progressed - Extent to which group goals were progressed	- Documents from mentor groups on group goals - Focus group discussions with mentees - Semi-structured interviews with mentors	- Qualitative document analysis - Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions - Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews
EQ2: To what extent were mentee needs and expectations about the program met?	- Extent to which mentees articulated needs and expectations about the program - Extent to which mentee needs and expectations were met	- Mentee application forms - Focus group discussions with mentees - Semi-structured interviews with mentors	- Qualitative document analysis - Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions - Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews
EQ7: To what extent did the mentees develop relevant, evaluation skills and knowledge?	- Extent to which mentees could articulate skills and knowledge they wanted to develop? - Extent to which self-articulated skills and knowledge of mentees were developed	- Focus group discussions with mentees - Semi-structured interviews with mentors	- Qualitative document analysis - Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions - Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews
RQ1: What were the unexpected outcomes for the development of mentees' skills and knowledge?		- Focus group discussions with mentees - Semi-structured interviews with mentors	- Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions - Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews

KEQ2: To what extent is the design of the mentoring program relevant for meeting the needs of mentors and mentees?			
EQ3: To what extent was the matching process of mentees to mentors successful?	• Extent to which mentors' skills and experienced matched the expressed needs of mentees • Extent to which mentees felt they were appropriately matched with mentors • Extent to which mentors felt they had the skill and expertise to support mentees	• Mentee application forms • Mentor web survey qu 12 & 13 • Mentee web survey qu 12 & 13 • Focus group discussions with mentees • Semi-structured interviews with mentors • Semi-structured interviews with AES Pathways Committee	• Qualitative analysis of application forms • Quantitative analysis of surveys • Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions • Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews
EQ4: To what extent was the orientation and initial meeting successful?	• Extent to which the initial meeting was driven by needs of mentee • Extent to which initial meeting allowed for the group goals to be formed • Mean score re helpfulness of orientation session	• Mentor web survey Qu 6 • Mentee web survey Qu 3 • Focus group discussions with mentees • Semi-structured interviews with mentors	• Quantitative analysis of surveys • Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions • Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews
EQ5: To what extent did the online platform enhance or hinder relationships?	• Mentors description of the positive and negative impacts of the online format	• Mentor web survey qu 9 • Mentee web survey qu 10 • Focus group discussions with mentees • Semi-structured interviews with mentors	• Quantitative analysis of surveys • Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions • Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews
RQ2: What skills were needed from mentors to support the groups?	• Extent to which mentors used skills relating to listening, facilitating, acting as a sounding board, helping mentees apply problem-solving-skills	• Mentee web survey qu 9 • Mentor survey qu 19 • Semi-structured interviews with mentors	• Quantitative analysis of survey • Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews

EQ6: To what extent does the group model work?	• Extent to which a group identity was formed • Extent to which mentees felt like there were formal peer support mechanisms and mutual social support • Extent to which a community of practice began to emerge from the group	• Mentor web survey qu 7 & 8, 10, 11 • Mentee web survey qu 11 • Focus group discussions with mentees • Semi-structured interviews with mentors	• Quantitative analysis of surveys • Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions • Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews
RQ3: What were the unexpected outcomes relating to the design of the mentor program?		• Mentor web survey • Mentee web survey • Focus group discussions with mentees • Semi-structured interviews with mentors	• Quantitative analysis of surveys • Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions • Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews
KEQ3: How worthwhile was the mentoring program in terms of time spent for stakeholders?			
RQ4: To what extent do mentees and mentors think the program was time well spent?	• Amount of time mentors prepared for each meeting • Amount of time mentees prepared for meetings • Extent to which mentees would be willing to share their experiences with other AES members	• Mentor web survey 3, 4 • Mentee web survey qu 6, 7 , 15 • Focus group discussions with mentees • Semi-structured interviews with mentors	• Quantitative analysis of surveys • Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions • Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews
RQ5: To what extent would mentees recommend the program to other AES members?	• # of times mentees recommended program to others • Extent to which mentees believe the program should be run again in its current form	• Focus group discussions with mentees • Semi-structured interviews with mentors	• Quantitative analysis of surveys • Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions • Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews

KEQ4: In its current form should the mentoring program be replicated?			
RQ6: What were the barriers and enablers to implementing the program in its current form?	• Extent to which mentees and mentors report barriers to program involvement • Extent to which mentees and mentors report enablers to program involvement	• Mentee survey qu 17, 18 • Mentor survey qu 16, 17 • Focus group discussions with mentees • Semi-structured interviews with mentors • Semi-structured interviews with AES Pathways Committee	• Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions • Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews
RQ7: What changes/modifications would be needed (if any) in the current program to replicate it?	• Extent to which mentees and mentors report changes needed to the program in its current form • Extent to which mentors and mentees believe the program should be run again in its current form	• Mentee survey qu 19 • Mentor survey qu 18 • Focus group discussions with mentees • Semi-structured interviews with mentors • Semi-structured interviews with AES Pathways Committee	• Qualitative analysis of focus group discussions • Qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews

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