



aes24

International **Evaluation** Conference

18-20 September 2024, Melbourne | Naarm | Australia

Evaluation Report



Conference logo artwork by Indigenous designers, Rebecca and Sara Hunt.

aes24 was held on the traditional lands and waterways of the
Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin nation
and pay our respects to ancestors and elders, past and present.
We also acknowledge all the First Nations people who joined the conference.
The conference venue sits next to Birrarung Marr (Yarra river).
Our conference logo, shows the eagle 'Bunjil' flying over these waters.

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Executive Summary

This report presents the planning, approach and findings of the evaluation of the annual international conference of the Australian Evaluation Society. It reports on the merit and worth of the conference for the AES and the range of conference delegates and identifies opportunities for improvement.

The evaluation team included two University of Melbourne Masters of Evaluation students, Ruth Walker and Wen Chee, who were supported by Mr. Bill Wallace, the 2024 Conference Working Group, and Capstone Fellow, Dr Alicia McCoy, Principal Consultant, First Person Consulting.

Two key evaluation questions were developed in collaboration with key AES stakeholders: (1) How valuable was the conference for the range of delegates; and (2) To what extent did the conference contribute to advancing the strategic priorities of the AES Board?

A utilisation focussed¹, mixed-method convergent design² was used to analyse data from interviews, post conference survey and other sources (SLIDO data, conference program, registration data and observations). The report conveys a high degree of satisfaction and value perceived by delegates and positive developments towards advancing the strategic priorities of the AES.



aes24 Keynote, June Oscar AO. Photography by Albie Colvin.

¹ Patton, 2021

² Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017

At a glance – aes24 participation³



Who came?

Age: 30-49 62% | 50-69 29% | 18-29 8% | 70+ 1%

Gender: women 72% | men 23% | non-binary 2%

First Nations: yes 15% | no 84%

AES member: yes 70%

Registered delegates: 685



Where from?

Australia 86% | Other 14%

Government 38% | Community 25% | Private 24%



Why attend?

knowledge acquisition 85% | connecting 70% |

building career or profile 40%

presenting 27% | CSG 6% | sponsor 7% | exhibitor 4%



What experience?

novice 16% | intermediate 40% | advanced 34% | expert 8%

Involvement in evaluation:

designing or conducting 60% | teaching or studying 15%

contributing 12% | commissioning 11% | using 2%



³ Based on post conference survey responses (n=290)

KEQ 1 | Perceptions of Value

The aes24 was held in Naarm, Melbourne, from 18-20 September 2024 with 685 registered delegates, the largest AES conference ever held.

Most survey respondents found the conference **valuable or very valuable**. Respondents expressed appreciation of the networking opportunities and acquired knowledge including knowledge of culturally safe evaluation practice.

Most respondents felt the conference represented **value for money**. However, 24 of the 43 open comments for this question referenced the conference being expensive.

Overall, respondents expressed a strong sense of satisfaction with the conference presentations, social program and general organisation of the event. They expressed a desire for more hands-on, interactive sessions and more presentations that showcase evaluation tools, frameworks and methods and more presentations targeted to intermediate or experienced evaluators.

KEQ 2 | Advancement of Strategic Priorities (SP)

The conference support grants program (CSG) is an important component of **Building capacity in cultural safety (SP1)**. In 2024, 27 people (from 154 applications) were supported to attend the conference via the CSG program. Overwhelmingly CSG recipients felt the conference helped build their understanding of culturally safe evaluation and allowed them to share their understanding of culturally safe evaluation.

Overall, those delegates who identified as First Nations and those who did not, said the conference built their understanding of culturally safe evaluation.

Delegates who presented at the conference were interviewed to explore the connection between presenting at the conference and **Building Professional and Career Pathways (SP2)**. All 24 agreed presenting at the conference supported professional pathways in the evaluation community.

With 46% of respondents attending an AES conference for the first time, supports such as the newcomers' welcome breakfast, pre-conference 'Navigating aes24' webinar, and a session on key evaluation concepts, were appreciated. It is an indicator of **Vitality (SP3)** that 54% of respondents had attended 2 or more conferences and 24% of those had attended more than 4 conferences. However, some of these delegates did call for more content for experienced evaluators and broader industry representation in the conference program.

Delegates came from a large range of sectors and industries reflecting the priority of forming strategic **Relationships (SP4)**. Connecting with others was identified as a strong motivation for attending and 98% of respondents said they made professional and/or social connections, and 67% said they felt part of a professional community when they left the conference.

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About the evaluation

This report presents the finding of the evaluation of the Australian Evaluation Society's (AES) 2024 International Evaluation Conference (aes24). It reports on the merit and worth of the conference for the AES and the range of conference delegates and identifies opportunities for improvement.

Using a utilisation focused⁴, mixed method convergent design⁵ (described fully in Appendix 1), the evaluation focused on two key questions:

KEQ1: How valuable was the conference for the range of delegates?

KEQ2: To what extent did the conference contribute to advancing the strategic priorities of the AES Board?

Data sources included:

- Documents (registration data, conference program, previous conference reports)
- Interview conducted during the conference with conference presenters (n=24)
- Post conference survey (n=290)

The value of the conference was explored from multiple perspectives by analysing responses from the following cohorts of delegates (noting that the cohorts are not mutually exclusive):

- **First Nations people** including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from Australia, and First Nations delegates from other countries
- **Novice evaluators** who self-identify as new to the profession
- **Intermediate evaluators** those who self-identify as having a level of experience in evaluation
- **Advanced evaluators** those who self-identify as having significant experience in evaluation
- **Expert evaluators** those who self-identify as being experts in evaluation
- **International delegates** those from outside Australia

About the conference

The AES conference is a key activity of the AES, contributing to both its aim of improving the theory, practice and use of evaluation and to the financial viability of the Society. Held annually and delivered over three days the conference is hosted by the AES Board and supported by the conference committee and a conference working group established each year in the host state. The conference included two days of pre-conference workshop which are out of scope of this evaluation.

The aes24, was held in Naarm, Melbourne, Victoria, from 18-20 September, with 685 registered delegates⁶, the largest AES conference ever held. The conference theme was 'Wayfinding', and focused attention on four areas:

- Destination: exploring evaluation that contributes to societal and planetary health
- Footprints: critical inquiry considering equity, decolonisation and the environment
- Tools: their role, benefits and risks
- Journey: how we learn and adapt in complex settings, shift how we show up and determine the skills, knowledge, and expertise we need today and, in the future.

⁴ Patton, 2008

⁵ Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017

⁶ Registration data, 2024

Conference delegates and attendance patterns

Personal characteristics

Most respondents were aged between 30 and 49 years (62%, n = 241), around a third (29%) were over 50 years old, and a small proportion were under 30 (8%) [Figure 1, Survey Question (SQ)37].

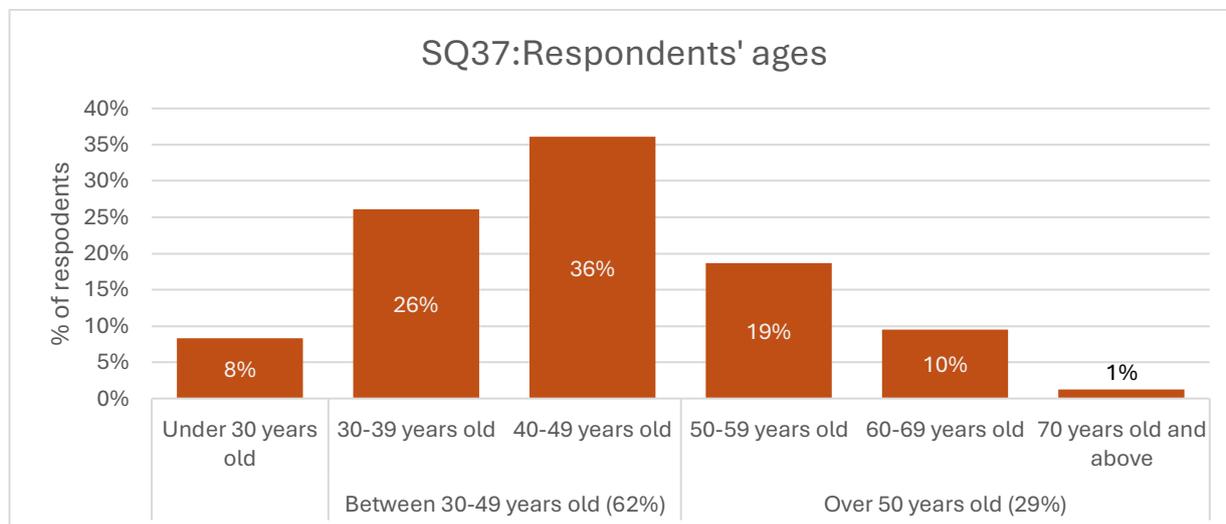


Figure 1: Respondents' ages

The majority of respondents were women (72%), 23% were men, 2% non-binary and 4% preferring not to answer. (SQ Q38, n=245). This representation by women at the conference is consistent with previous years, with women representing 79% and 76% of respondents in 2023 and 2022⁷.

Representation by First Nations people continues to be strong with 15 % of respondents identifying as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, Māori, Pacific Islander and/or other Indigenous origin, 84% identified as non-Indigenous, and 2% preferred not to specify (SQ40, n = 244, Figure 2). This is similar representation as in 2023 where 14% of respondents identified as Indigenous.

Geographical characteristics

Most respondents were from Australia (86%), and 14% from overseas (n = 242). Australian respondents came from all states and territories: Victoria (46%), New South Wales (15%), Australian Capital Territory (8%), Queensland (7%), South Australia (5%), Northern Territory (3%), Western Australia (2%), and Tasmania (1%) (SQ2, n=273, Figure 3).

International delegates came from New Zealand (3%) and 11% from other countries including Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Thailand, Laos, Kenya, and USA. (SQ39, n=242). This represented an increase in international respondents from the 2023 conference (11%), but still lower than international representation from pre-COVID 2017 (17%).

⁷ AES 2023 & 2022 Evaluation Reports and Survey Comparison data were used to compare aes24 data with previous conference data.

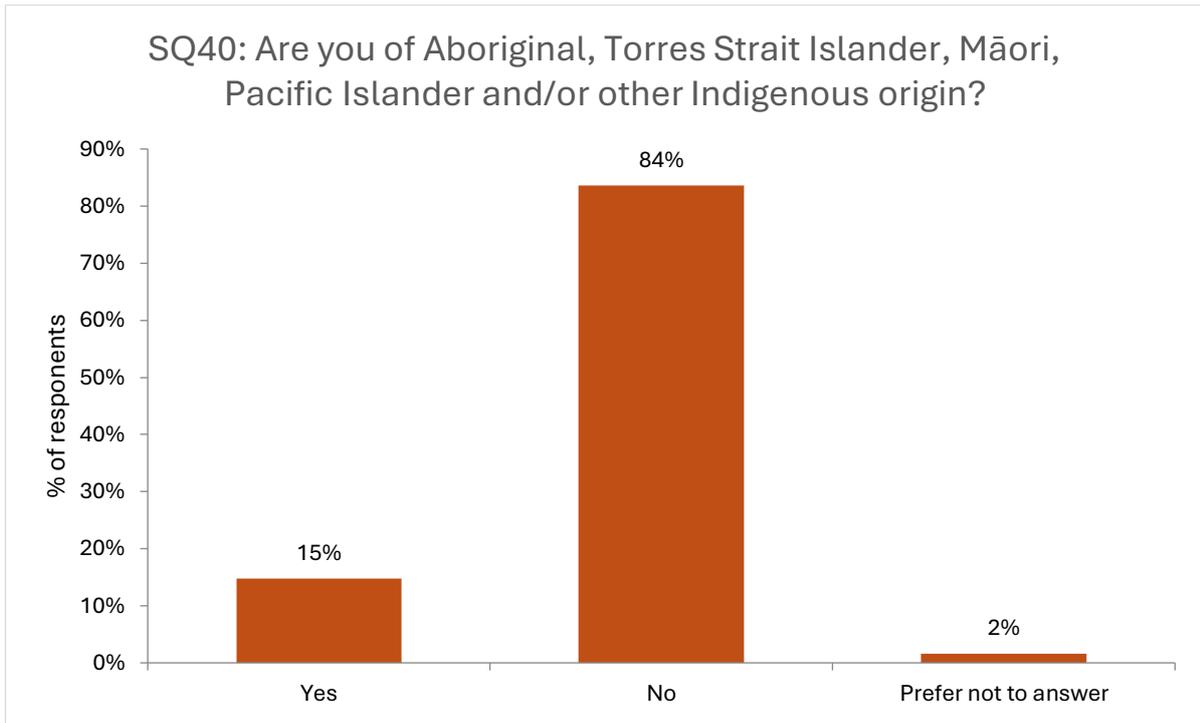


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who identified as First Nations

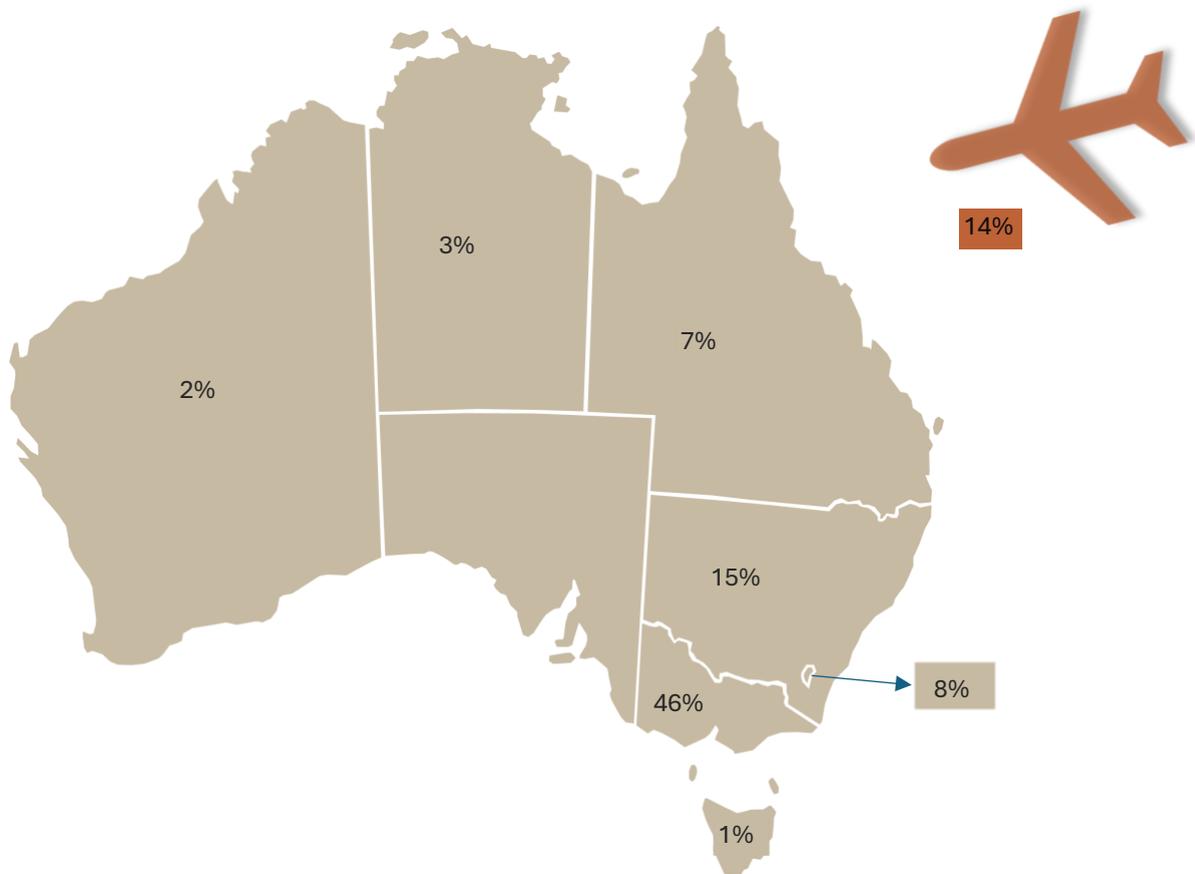


Figure 3: Geographical distribution of respondents

Map from Rycherr at English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Professional characteristics

The conference attracted delegates with a range of expertise and from different areas of the evaluation profession. Most respondents identified their level of expertise in evaluation as intermediate (40%) or advanced (34%). Other categories were novice (16%), expert (8%) and no expertise in evaluation (2%) (SQ32, n=247, Figure 4). This distribution is consistent with 2023 data.

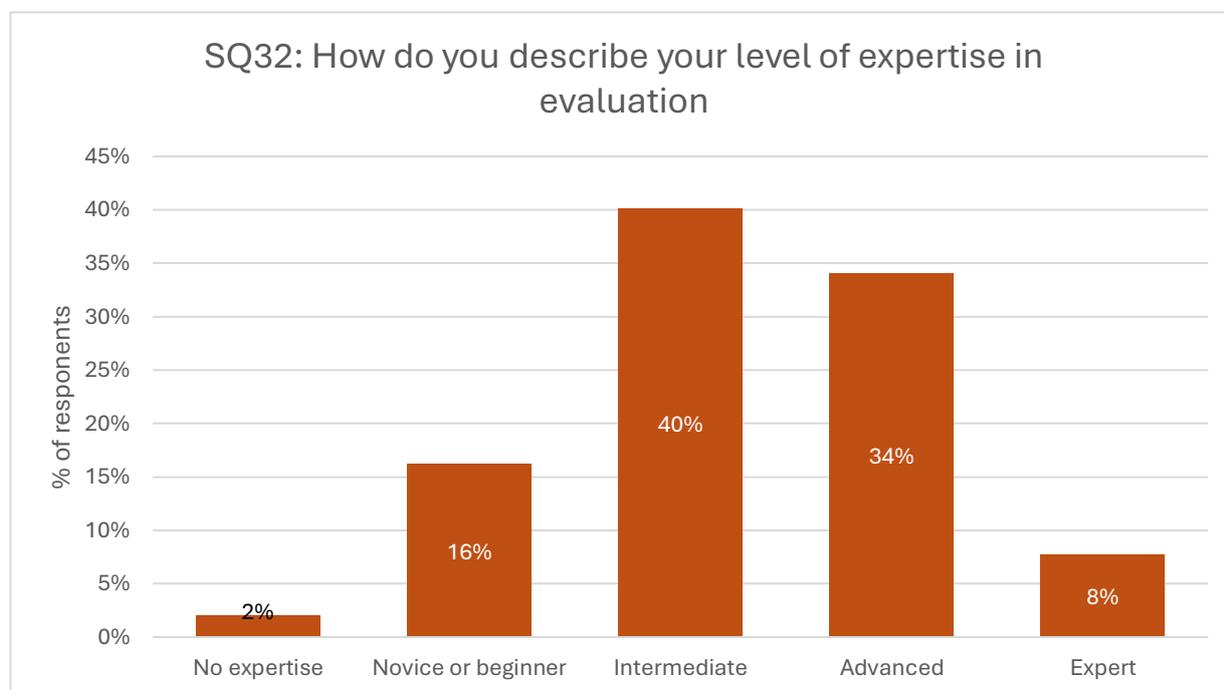


Figure 2: Respondents' self-assessment of expertise in evaluation

Most respondents identified their main role in evaluation as designing or conducting evaluations (60%). Approximately a quarter (25%) were from the other side of the evaluation process, including commissioning or contracting evaluation projects (11%), contributing data or information to evaluations (6%), running programs or projects evaluated by others (5%), or reading or using evaluation reports and findings (2%). A smaller proportion (15%) were involved in the academic contexts, either studying or learning about evaluation (2%), teaching evaluation (2%), or teaching *and* conducting evaluations (11%). Only a small number of respondents indicated no current involvement in evaluation (<1%) (SQ35, n=247, Figure 5).

Respondents represented a range of sectors and industries. Sectors represented included government (38%); private sector, including consultancies (24%); community or non-profit sector (25%); and academic sector, including university staff and students (8%) and other including international development and philanthropy (5%) (SQ33, n=247).

About a third of respondents worked in community and social services (29%). Other main industries included education and training (15%) health and disability (14%) and public administration and safety (14%) (Figure 5, SQ34, n=245, Figure 6).

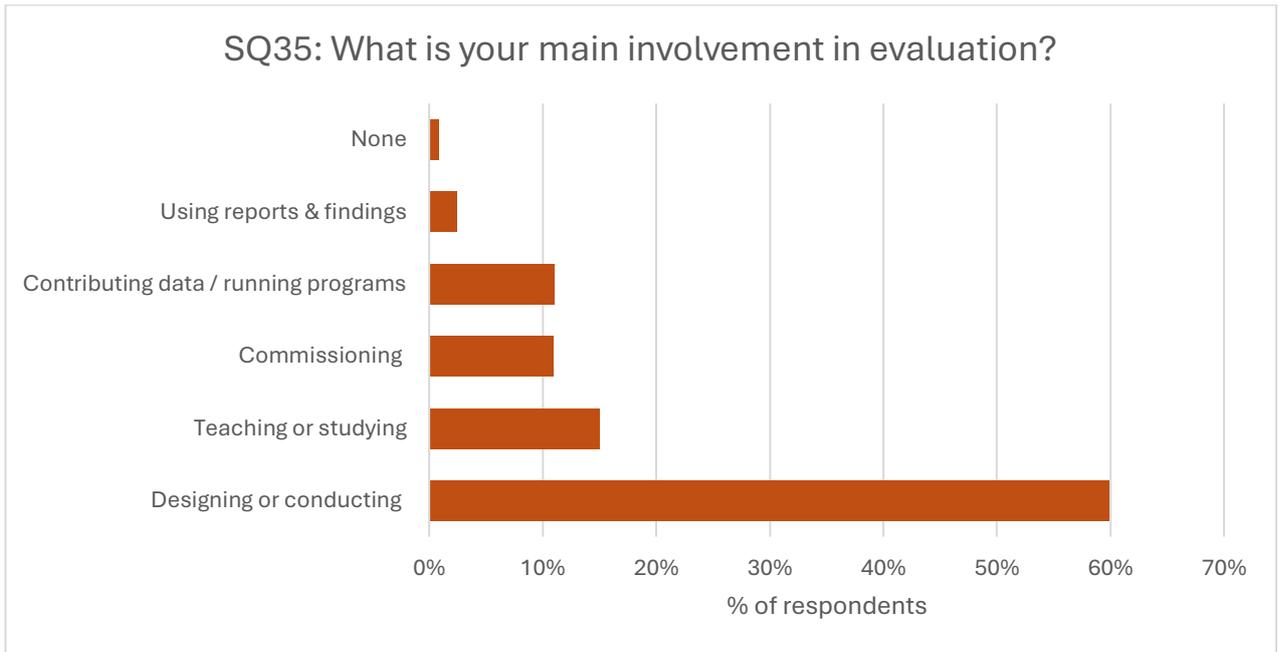


Figure 3: Respondents' main role in evaluation

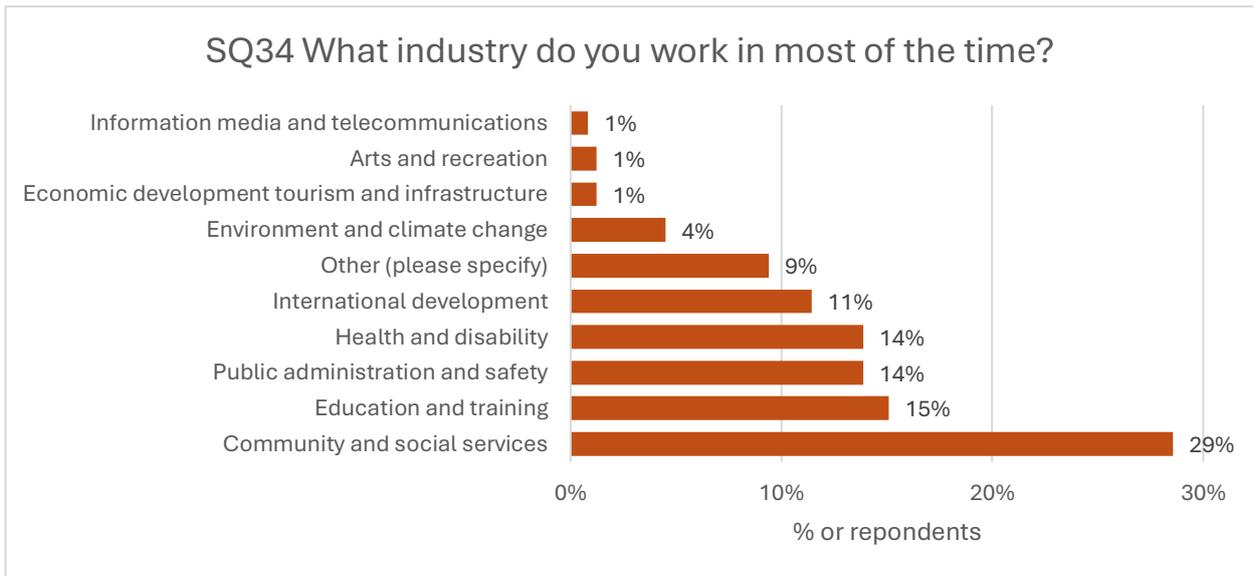


Figure 4: Industries respondents work in

Most respondents were AES members, either individually (52%) or through their organisation (19%) or were considering joining or rejoining (18%). Three who responded 'other' were either recently joined or about to join. Very few (9%) indicated they were not interested in joining the AES (SQ36, n=247).

Conference attendance patterns

Almost half the respondents were attending their first AES conference (46%), a third had been to two or three AES conferences (30%) and 24% had attended four or more AES conferences (SQ4, n=273, Figure 7). Compared to aes23, this represents a slight decrease in first timers (51%,)⁸ and a small increase in those who have attended 2-3 conferences (27%) or more than 4 conferences (22%).

Survey responses indicated that most (83%) attended all three days of the conference. The pre-conference workshops were attended by 33% of survey respondents (SQ3, n=273). In total over 700⁹ people attended the pre-conference workshops and the aes24.

Employers fund most conference attendance (67%) and 19% were self-funded. A small number indicated a mix of employer and self-funding (4%) and 7% were recipients of conference grants or scholarships.

The number of respondents who had additional roles at aes24 was relatively consistent with the 2023 conference results with 27% identifying as presenters and a small proportion identifying as sponsors (7%), conference support grant recipients (6%), exhibitors (4%), and organisers or volunteers (5%) (Survey Q2, n=273).

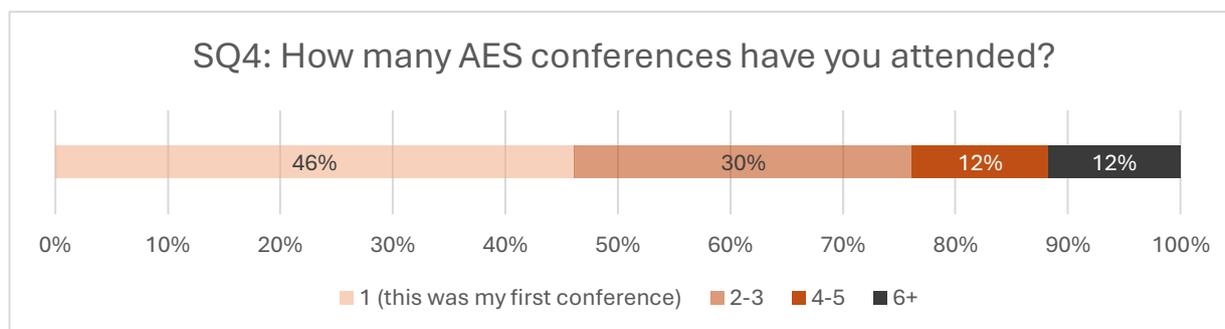


Figure 5: Number of AES conferences attended

⁸ AES, 2023 conference report

⁹ Registration data for aes24 plus pre-conference workshops

Perceptions of value (KEQ1)

Overall, delegates found the conference valuable

Most survey respondents found the conference valuable or very valuable (86%), and few (2%) did not find the conference valuable (SQ22, n=247, Figure 8). At the end of the conference, respondents felt inspired (61%), informed (62%) and part of a professional community (67%) (SQ18, n=242, Figure 9).

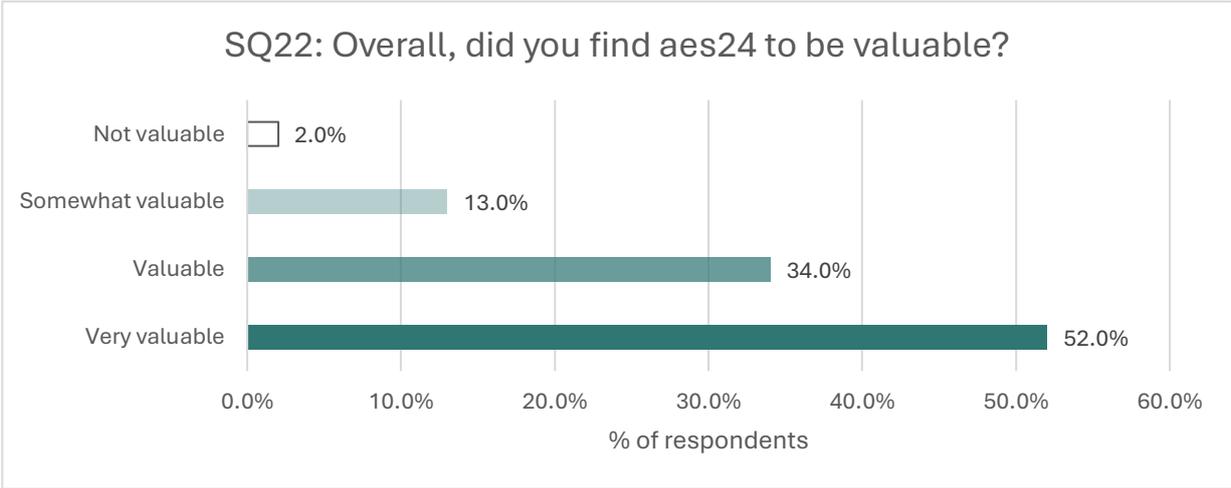


Figure 6: Overall assessment of the value of aes24

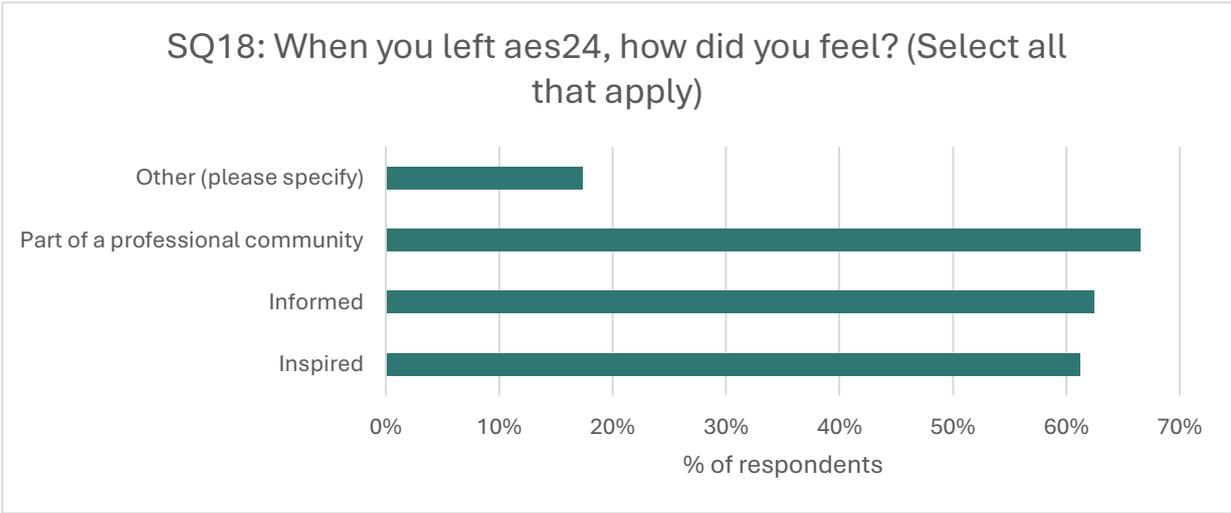


Figure 7: How delegates felt after the conference

Perceptions of value showed similar trends across the priority groups with international (100%) novice (98%) and First Nations delegates (94%) the greatest supporters of overall value.

SQ22: Overall, did you find aes24 to be valuable?							
	All (n=247)	First Nations (n=35)	Novice (n=40)	Intermediate (n=96)	Advanced (n=84)	Expert (n=19)	International (n=31)
Valuable or very valuable	86%	94%	98%	88%	79%	79%	100%
Somewhat valuable	12%	3%	2%	12%	18%	10%	0%
Not valuable	2%	3%	0%	0%	3%	11%	0%

Table 1: Perceptions of overall value by priority groups

Those who did not find the conference valuable expressed criticism of repetitive content and ‘*research dressed up as evaluation*’ (comments, SQ22). Expressions of disappointed referenced lack of depth in the sessions (due to time constraints) and commercialisation of evaluation (‘*too many presentations by consultants*’) (comments SQ18).

Positive feedback highlighted acquired knowledge and networking opportunities and several commented on the value of hearing from Indigenous presenters and learning about culturally safe evaluation practice. Twelve people noted that they were tired, but in a good way.

*My experience at the 24AES International Conference was very impactful. The conference significantly enriched my existing MEL knowledge and provided a valuable opportunity to stay updated on current practices and emerging trends in the field.
(First conference, First Nations respondent, SQ7)*

They got what they came for

The most common motivations for attending the conference were:

- Knowledge acquisition (85%)¹⁰
- Connecting with others involved in evaluation (70%)
- Location and timing of the conference (48%)
- Growing your career or profile (40%)
- Conference theme and/or program (38%)

The motivations showed similar trends across the priority groups with particularly strong importance given to ‘acquisition of knowledge’ from First Nations (94%, n=35), intermediate (92%, n=96), and international (90%) delegates. Connecting with others was slightly more important to international (77%), advanced (75%), expert (74%) and First Nations (74%) delegates, than it was for novice (70%) and intermediate (66%) evaluators. Note that the priority groups ‘First Nations’ and ‘International’ are not mutually exclusive, nor are they mutually exclusive from the different levels of expertise.

¹⁰ Calculated from SQ6 (n=273) using rating of 8-10 from a scale of 0 (not at all important) to 10 (very important)

Happily, delegate feedback suggests their motivations were generally met as demonstrated in Table 2.

Motivation	
What delegates were seeking from aes24 ¹¹	What the delegates said
Knowledge acquisition (85%)	89% acquired knowledge they intended to incorporate into their work (SQ21, n=247)
Connecting with others involved in evaluation (70%)	98% said they made professional and/or social connections (SQ15) and 67% said they felt part of a professional community when they left the conference (SQ18, n=242)
Suitable location and timing of the conference (48%)	685 people registered for aes24 (Registration data) the largest conference registration ever, which suggests the timing and location were appealing
Growing your career or profile (40%)	100% of presenters interviewed agreed that presenting at the conference helped grow their career or profile or that of others in the evaluation community (Interview Q3, n=24)

Table 2: Did they get what they came for? Motivation for attending aes24 compared to self-reported take aways.

Value for money

Overall, respondents felt the conference represented value for money especially for international (87%), First Nations (80%), novice (75%) and expert (74%) evaluators (SQ23, n=247, Figure 11).

SQ23: Did the conference represent value for money?							
	All	First Nations	Novice	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	International
	(n=247)	(n=35)	(n=40)	(n=96)	(n=84)	(n=19)	(n=31)
Yes	66%	80%	75%	60%	64%	74%	87%
No	9%	3%	0%	9%	11%	16%	0%
Unsure	25%	17%	25%	30%	25%	10%	13%

Table 3: Perceptions of value for money by priority groups

Twenty-four or 43 comments in SQ23 referenced the conference being expensive and 6 noted that they either didn't pay or received reduced rates as a student. (SQ23, n=247)

Respondents showed a strong interest in attending the 2025 AES conference with 77% indicating they intended to do so (SQ24, n=247).

The AES24 Conference represented excellent value for money. The investment in the conference was justified by the high-quality sessions, access to knowledgeable speakers, and the wealth of resources provided. The diverse range of topics covered ensured that attendees could find relevant and applicable insights for their work. Additionally, the networking opportunities

¹¹ SQ6, n=273, responses 8-10 (important and very important)

allowed for meaningful connections with other professionals in the evaluation field, further enhancing the value of my experience. Overall, the benefits I gained from attending far outweighed the costs, making it a worthwhile investment in my professional development. (Self-funded + CSG recipient)

The conference cost is a large outlay for me as a self-employed consultant but as long as I'm very involved during the week as I always try to be, it represents good value for money. (Self-funded, has attended 2-3 AES conferences)

Balance of sessions

Overall, respondents felt the mix of presentation types and conference elements was about right for most items (SQ11, n=252, Figure 8)), with a strong indication (42%)¹² that more *hands-on interactive sessions* would be appreciate. This desire was expressed by First Nations (52%) intermediate (52%) and international evaluators (64%).

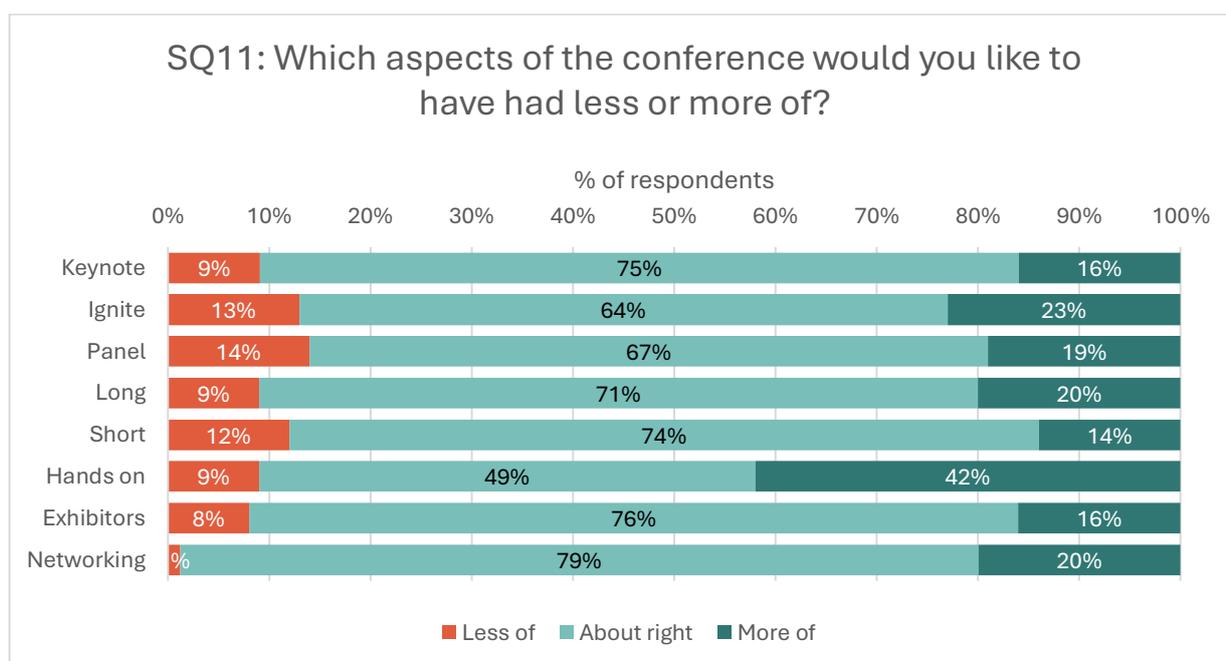


Figure 8: Elements of the conference delegates wanted less or more of.

There was a strong desire for more presentations that *showcase evaluation tools, frameworks and methods* (66%, SQ12, n=245, Figure 9). This call came from novice (56%), intermediate (69%) advanced (73%), First Nations (79%) and international (77%) evaluators. Advanced (62%) expert (56%), First Nations (63%) and international evaluators (55%) expressed desire for *presentations targeted to intermediate or experienced evaluators* (SQ12).

¹² Represents the proportion of respondents who chose an option other than n/a

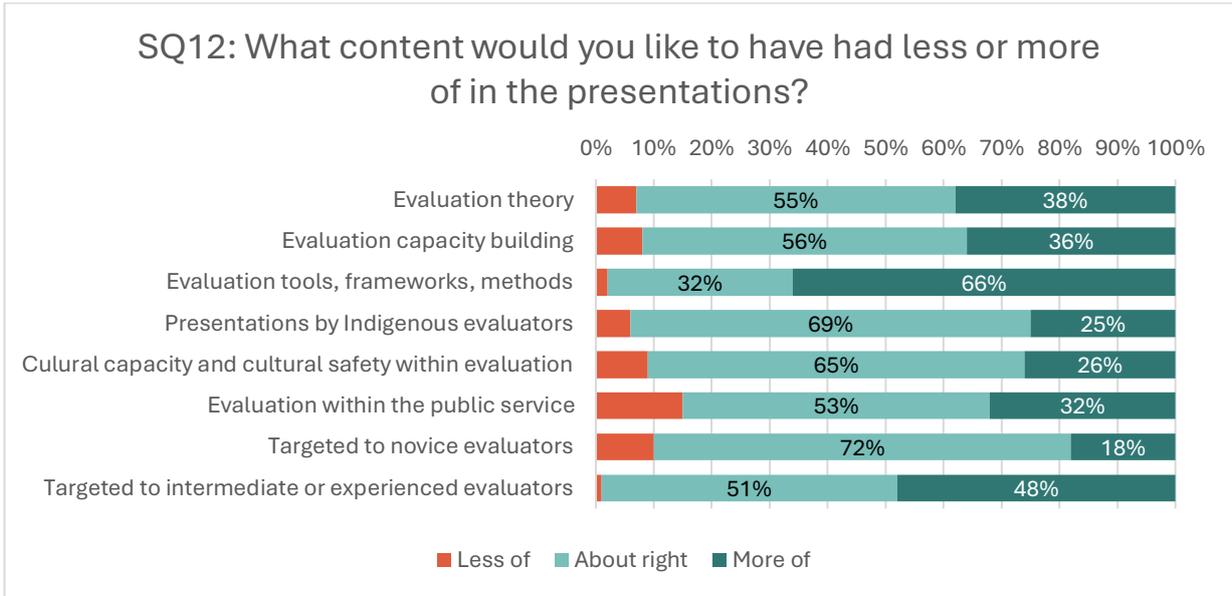


Figure 9: Delegates' opinions on content: more, less or about right

Quality of the presentations

Delegates expressed high levels of satisfaction with the range and quality of the presentations. There was little variation across the different categories with highly satisfied ratings (8-10) ranging from 60%¹³ for *targeting of presentations to experience level* to 72% for *variety of durations of presentations*.

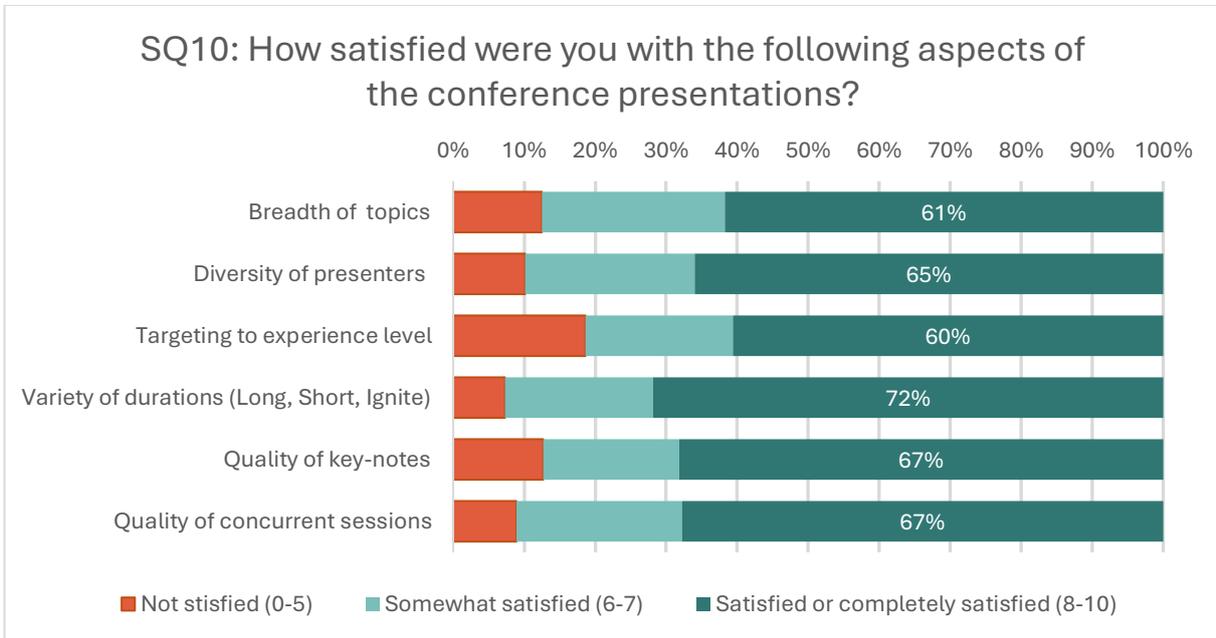


Figure 10: Levels of satisfaction with various elements of the conference presentations

¹³ Represents the proportion of respondents who chose an option other than 'n/a'

Analysis of priority groups showed some variation between levels of satisfaction with First Nations, International, novice and intermediate evaluators generally showing much higher rates of satisfaction. While advanced and expert evaluators were highly satisfied with these aspects of the conference presentations, they expressed slightly lower levels of satisfaction than novice, intermediary or expert evaluators. The only group who expressed satisfaction levels of less than 50% highly satisfied, were expert evaluators in relation to *targeting presentations to experience level* where only 39% of expert evaluators were highly satisfied (28% were 'somewhat satisfied', 33% were 'not satisfied').

	All (n=247)	First Nations (n=5)	Novice (n=40)	Intermediate (n=96)	Advanced (n=84)	Expert (n=19)	International (n=31)
Breadth of topics	61%	71%	80%	60%	54%	53%	77%
Diversity of presenters	65%	74%	88%	64%	58%	58%	77%
Targeting to experience level	60%	74%	79%	62%	53%	39%	87%
Variety of durations	72%	80%	83%	71%	69%	68%	87%
Quality of keynotes	67%	86%	93%	69%	57%	58%	81%
Quality of concurrent	67%	74%	87%	70%	54%	72%	73%

Table 4: Proportion of respondents who were satisfied or completely satisfied (8-10) by priority groups. Note groups are not mutually exclusive. N/A responses have been removed.

Advancement of the strategic priorities (KEQ2)

This section of the report focuses on the four strategic priorities of the AES Board 2019-2022 and whether the conference supported advancement in these priorities. The four strategic priorities are:

- Building capacity in culturally safe evaluation
- Supporting professional and career pathways
- Vitality and diversity
- Being part of a community, building relationships

Evidence used to determine the merit of the conference in relation to these outcomes included: analysis of conference program, various questions and open comments in the post conference survey and interviews with those who presented at the conference.

Building capacity in culturally safe evaluation

This strategic priority focuses on supporting emerging Indigenous evaluators, promoting excellence in Indigenous evaluation and developing Indigenous and non-Indigenous capacity in culturally safe evaluation theory practice and use.

The Conference Support Grants (CSG) program and the focus on cultural safety across the conference program are important factors in advancing this strategic priority. There has been a steady increase in both applications and recipients of the CSG program. In 2024, 27 people (from 154 applications) were supported to attend the conference via the CSG program, compared to 18 recipients in 2023 CSG program.

In the post conference survey 15 people identified as Conference Support Grants (CSG) recipients (SQ2), of these, 77% felt the conference **helped build their understanding** of culturally safe evaluation (SQ19: n=13, Figure 12) and 85% felt the conference **allowed them to share** their understanding of culturally safe evaluation (SQ20: n=13, Figure 13).

Overall, those who identified as First Nations (SQ40: n=40) were more likely to say the conference **built their understanding** of culturally safe evaluation (80%, Figure 12) and **allowed them to share** their understanding of culturally safe evaluation (71%, Figure 13), than those who did not identify as First Nations (SQ19, 62%, Figure 12) (SQ20, 32%: Figure 13) (n=202).



2024 CSG recipients. Photography by Albie Colvin.

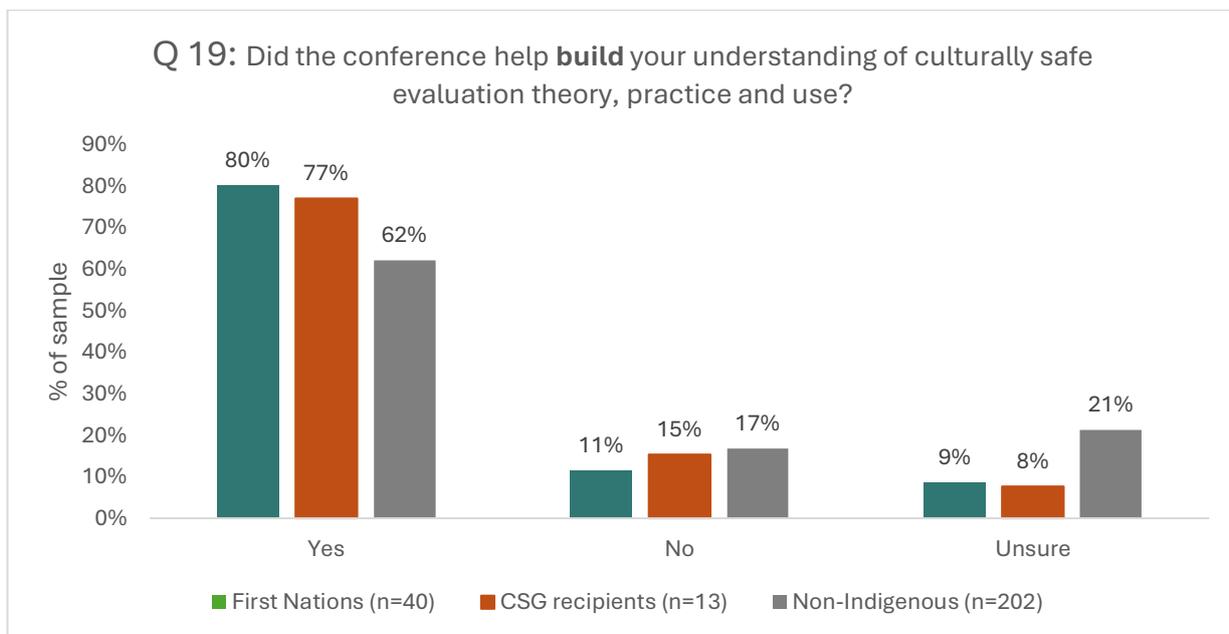


Figure 11: Delegates' perception of **building** their capacity in culturally safe evaluation by First Nations, CSG recipients, and non-indigenous (not exclusive groups).

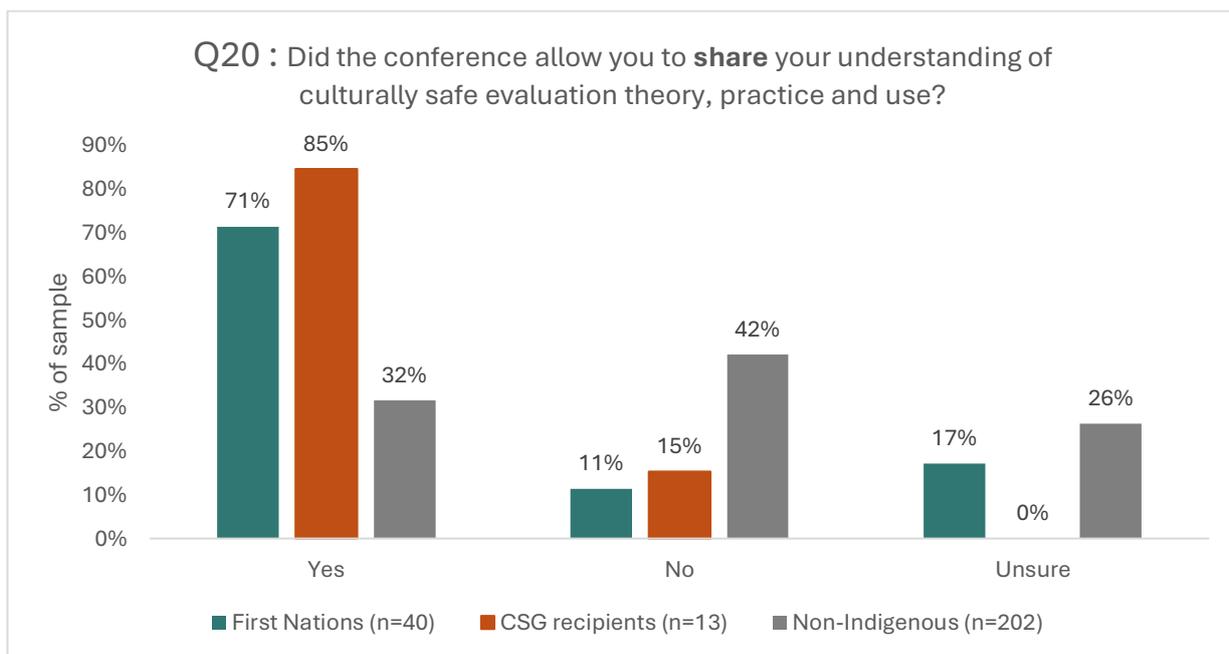


Figure 12: Delegates' perception of **sharing** understanding of culturally safe evaluation by First Nations, CSG recipients, and non-indigenous (not exclusive groups).

It makes sense that those who did not identify as First Nations / Indigenous felt they had less opportunity to share their understanding of culturally safe evaluation, so it's interesting to note in Figure 13, that 32% felt they did have that opportunity. One person commented,

*I shared my learnings with colleagues immediately & we are applying them right now..
(non-Indigenous, first conference, advanced evaluator)*

The focus on building cultural capacity was evident throughout the conference program with 21 of the 118 sessions having explicit connection to Indigenous cultural safety in evaluation (Conference program analysis).

Most respondents felt the balance of sessions focused on cultural capacity and cultural safety was about right (63%) and 25% requested more (SQ12, n=252).

In response to Q21 *Did you learn about any evaluation related concepts at aes24?*, 13 out of 84 open comments specifically referenced learning about culturally safe evaluation practices. For example:

Engaging in conversations with fellow attendees about the significance of integrating cultural perspectives in evaluation processes was valuable. These informal discussions contributed to a deeper understanding of culturally safe practices and highlighted the importance of fostering inclusivity in evaluation work...the opportunity to engage with a diverse group of professionals expanded my understanding of culturally safe evaluation.
(CSG recipient, Female, <30years)

In answer to Q19 *Did the conference help build your understanding of culturally safe evaluation theory, practice and use?* Several respondents took the opportunity to call for more diversity in the focus of culturally safety. For example,

There was a lot of space for voices of First Nations Australians sharing about their community and culture. I felt there was a lack of intersectionality and representations of other diverse voices (disability in particular was not very present, there was limited but some LGBTQIA).
(Intermediate, under 30, Female, Non-Indigenous)

There was definitely a focus on culturally safe in the context of Indigenous Australians which is very important. There was also a large contingent of Pacific Islanders, and it would have been great to also see it extended to that aspect / the international development space (No expertise in evaluation, 40-49 years old, Female, Non-Indigenous)

This didn't appear to be offered outside of Indigenous Australia presentations...I would have valued that content for other cross-cultural settings
(Intermediate, 30-39, Female, Non-Indigenous)

I wish there were more on this - not just Indigenous (very important and well represented at conference) but for diverse cultural groups more broadly.
(Intermediate, 30-39, Female, Non-Indigenous)

Supporting professional and career pathways

This strategic priority focuses on promoting excellence in evaluation practice and supporting professional pathways for evaluators. One of the main goals of this priority is to provide opportunities for growth and development for evaluators.

Delegates rated *growing career or profile* as an important factor influencing their decision to attend the conference.

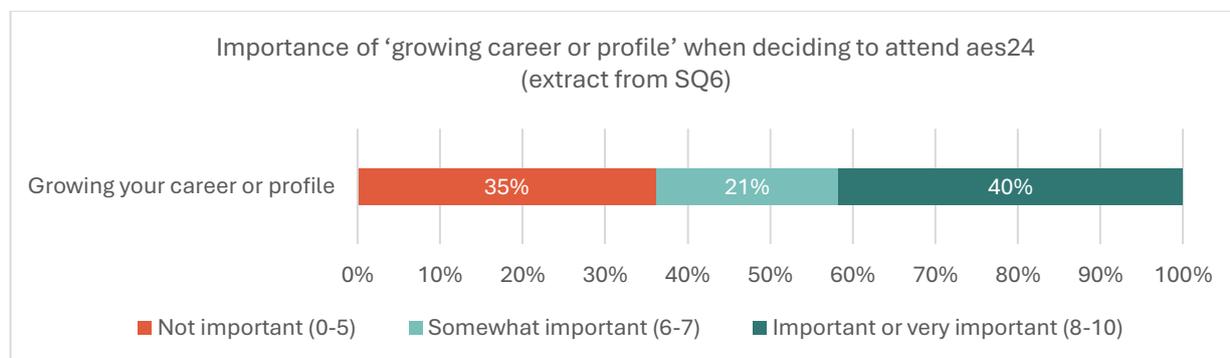


Figure 13: Delegates' rating of the importance of 'growing career or profile' as a motivation for attending the conference

Delegates who presented at the conference were interviewed to explore whether they perceived an association between presenting at the conference and their professional growth and development.

Presenters were asked what motivated them to present at the conference and 19 out of 24 specifically mentioned career, profile or supporting the evaluation community. Several were motivated by the learning opportunity and 3 mentioned funding as a motivator, that is, their employer funded them to attend the conference because they were presenting.

The interviewer outlined this strategic priority and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed that presenting had helped them build their professional or career pathway. Twenty three of 24 agreed presenting supported their own career pathway and 1 felt presenting supported the career pathway of those attending their presentation.



Photography by Albie Colvin.

Vitality, diversity

This strategic priority focuses on being an inclusive society that meets diverse member needs and understands the needs and issues of the members and the communities in which they work.

The conference has a strong focus on welcoming and supporting new and emerging evaluators and this is evidenced both in the CSG program and in supports for first time conference delegates. The registration process invited delegates to identify as novice, emerging and/or first-time attendees and this resulted in them being invited to events such as a pre-conference webinar 'First time navigators aes24' and the 'First Nations, CSG and New Delegate Breakfast'. A session 'Planning your conference voyage: Key evaluation concepts for novice sailors' was offered on day 1 of the conference. These events were appreciated by newcomers,

*I'm grateful for the session provided for beginners to familiarise new/emerging evaluators such as myself with basic evaluation concepts on Day 1 of the conference thank you for helping newbies like myself to slowly navigate our way during the week.
(International delegate, First Nations, first conference)*

It is an indicator of **Vitality** that 54% of respondents had attended 2 or more conferences and 24% of those had attended more than 4 conferences. However, some advanced evaluators felt the balance of focus could shift more towards experienced evaluators to ensure their needs are met.

*I think you have to move on from the current paper selection process. If you keep dealing with 'new evaluators', you are not building the profession.
(Self-identified as advanced evaluator, 6+ conferences)*

*It seemed to me that the AES conference is no longer the place for more advanced practitioners to go to learn. This is a great pity as I have not missed an AES conference in years. I would in all likelihood not attend again if the content remained the same.
(advanced evaluator, 6+ conferences, rated knowledge acquisition as a strong motivator for attending)*

Across various survey question responses there were calls for papers and presentations from a broader range of industries.

*I was disappointed that there was extremely little to no environment topics in the concurrent sessions, particularly given some of the issues raised in plenary sessions. I am aware of several environmental presentations that weren't selected following abstract submission. "you can't be what you can't see".
(advanced evaluator, 6+ conferences)*

Being part of a community, building relationships

This strategic priority focuses on building relationships and partnerships within and beyond the evaluation sector including developing networks with other evaluation associations.

Respondents identified networking and professional connections as very important to them (70%) and (98%) indicated that they had achieved this outcome.¹⁴

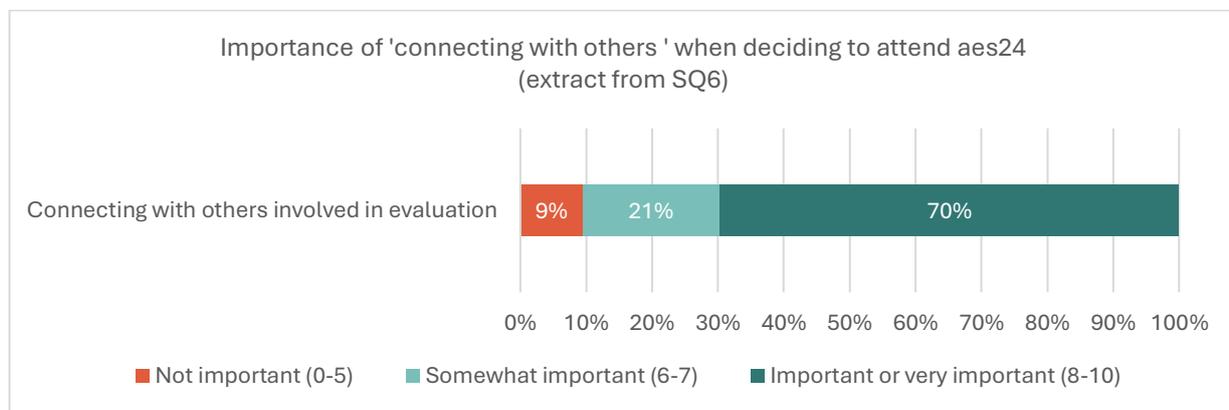


Figure 14: Delegates' rating of the importance of 'making connections' as a motivation for attending the conference

The most common situation for making professional and social connections was during breaks (89%), during the concurrent sessions (45%) and at the Gala dinner (45%) only 2% said they did not make any connections (SQ15, n=252). Over three quarters (73%) of respondents felt the balance of networking and social opportunities before, during and after the conference was 'about right' (SQ11). Open field responses confirmed these sentiments,

*I was surprised at how moving the award presentations were at the Gala dinner, and this really cemented for me the feeling of being part of the 'evaluation community' which had been developing through the conference
(intermediate evaluator, first conference)*

*The biggest benefit I got from the conference was the personal/professional connections I made and I would have appreciated better design of the space to foster conversation and deep engagement in a comfortable environment.
(advanced evaluator, 2-3 conferences)*

However, there were several calls for greater connections and relationship building with other organisations,

*I would like to see some of the final panel comments taken on board re engaging more with those outside of the evaluation industry. ... AES25 could draw on its location (Canberra) to pull some critical public service agencies into sessions (eg the evaluation of the Murray Darling Basin Plan...The move to nature positive policy; the impacts of energy transformation to net zero etc)
(advanced evaluator, 6+ conferences)*

¹⁴ SQ6 (what was important when deciding to attend) and SQ15 (when did you make professional or social connections)

Suggestions for Future Conferences

The post conference survey results (presented in Figures 12 and 13) provided clear data supporting the following suggestions:

- more *hands-on sessions*
- more presentations that *showcase evaluation tools, frameworks and methods*
- more *presentations targeted to intermediate or experienced evaluators*

There were many suggestions in the open comments sections of the post conference survey and while these may have come from a small number of people, they may warrant consideration by the convenors of future conferences. They are loosely grouped as follows:

Conference organisation:

- 34 comments expressed dislike for the long days and/or the inconsistent start times
- 9 people suggested the Sched app was difficult to use because it was not clear how the session times overlapped
- 5 people suggested more structured networking opportunities such as speed dating, fireside small group discussions, quiet, comfortable sitting spaces.
- 4 people commented on different accessibility issues they experienced ranging from, overuse of screens and lighting, to stuffy, small rooms and long distances between rooms.
- One person requested non-alcoholic beer or wine for the social events

Content of the presentations:

- 15 people thought the keynote presentations needed to be more aligned to evaluation
- 14 people called for more sessions aimed at advanced evaluators and 2 people wanted to hear more from leaders in evaluation
- 10 people commented that evaluation is a political and controversial practice and called for more content that highlights controversy. One commented, *'I think we sit with a lot of tensions in evaluation. I would love to see these tensions made visible and more explicit through presentations / round table discussions'* (intermediate evaluator, first conference)
- 13 people called for more session on inclusion, accessibility and lived experience in evaluation
- 9 people wanted more session on cultural safety
- 8 comments called for more sessions on quantitative methods
- 7 comments called for more sessions on environmental issues

Structure of presentations

- There were 8 comments about panel sessions needing to be more interactive and debate like. One said most panels were just people lined up to talk, and didn't involve interaction.
- 12 people requested more time for question and answer and discussion during sessions

Diversity of presenters

- 12 people said there were too many presentations by consultants
- 7 comments called for more representation from internal evaluators in government departments and other authorities

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Appendix 1: Methodology

A utilisation lens was applied to the logic of evaluation¹⁵ to guide the overall design of the evaluation, and realist theory¹⁶ informed the identification of priority groups for deep analysis of their different experiences of the conference. Theory about conference design and textbooks on event management helped define the criteria, indicators and measures such as: knowledge transfer, program and presentations, professional networking opportunities and organisational features.¹⁷

The evaluation applied a mix method approach using quantitative data (post conference survey), qualitative data (interviews) and document review following a three-phase convergent design¹⁸. That is, evaluation activities were divided into three-phases (pre-conference, during conference and post conference) and the data sets were analysed separately, then merged and interpreted to inform findings.

Phase 1 was conducted in the pre-conference period from 22 July to 17 September. The focus during this time was on scoping the evaluation in consultation with the client, preparing the evaluation plan, conducting a literature review, adapting the post-conference survey instrument, developing the interview protocol and instrument and determining the sampling approach for interviews

Phase 2 occurred during the conference from 18 to 20 September. This included conducting semi-structured interviews with a range of delegates who presented papers at the conference. Informal observations and note taking were undertaken throughout the conference.

Phase 3 occurred post conference. This included conducting the post-conference survey, analysing and synthesising the data from both the post-conference survey and the interviews, reporting findings to primary intended users and publishing the evaluation report.

At each phase, concerted effort was made to engage the primary intended users in dialogue and decision making.

Data sources and collection

The **post conference survey** was adapted from the aes23 survey and refined in consultation with the Capstone Fellow and representatives of the aes24 Conference Working Group. Consideration was given to maintaining consistency with past survey questions to allow cross year comparisons. The survey was tested and launched on 23 September via Survey Monkey. It remained open for two weeks closing on 9 October (n=290).

The **interview protocols and question instrument** were developed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted and audio recorded during the conference. A purposive sample of twenty-four presenters was selected with consideration of the priority groups (First Nations delegates, international delegates, novice, intermediate and experienced evaluators), and the range of

¹⁵ Patton, 2021

¹⁶ Pawson & Tilley, 1997

¹⁷ Jack & Glover, 2021; Rogers & Moylan, 2022).

¹⁸ Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017

presentation types. The total number of the sample was determined in consideration of the constraints of a single interviewer and application of a ‘saturation’ approach.¹⁹

Informal observations and notetaking conducted throughout the conference captured observations to support understanding of findings.

Other sources of data such as registration data, conference program, SCHED and Slido, were used to triangulate and/or enrich the main sources of data.

Analysis and synthesis

The data were **analysed** separately then combined as per the convergent design. To assist **synthesis** a matrix was created mapping the evaluation questions and sub questions to the range of data items.

The **interview audio recordings** were transcribed using ‘Rev’ and imported into Excel. Manual thematic coding using a deductive approach focused on answering EQ2 and followed the six steps developed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The **post-conference survey** data were analysed using automated charts from Survey Monkey and Excel. Data were disaggregated according to the priority groups and SPSS was used for crosstabulations. Some survey responses were compared to aes2023 data. Tolerances were applied to Likert scale questions to define unacceptable (0-5), adequate (6-7) and good results (8-10).

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all satisfied	Quite unsatisfied		Mildly unsatisfied		neutral	Mildly satisfied		Quite satisfied		Completely satisfied

Figure 15: Likert scale interpretation showing tolerances for unacceptable, adequate and good results.

Finally, a rubric was developed and applied to make an evaluative conclusion on the overall performance of the conference in delivering value to delegates and contributing to the strategic priorities of the AES.

Reporting

Early analysis was provided to the 2025 Conference Working Group to inform calls for papers for aes25. A presentation to the AES Board was held on 23 November 2024 to share high-level findings. The final report was submitted for review on 9 December 2024, and at the time of writing was planned for publishing on the AES website in early 2025.

Ethical considerations and limitations

Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations²⁰ and AES First Nations Cultural Framework²¹ were consulted during the design and considered throughout the evaluation process. Protocols for informed consent, data collection and access, confidentiality, privacy, acknowledgement of contributors, and accurate reflection of diverse perspectives were applied.

There were several potential limitations in the evaluation design and execution. The short period between assignment of the evaluation project and the start of the AES conference was a key limitation. Contact between the consultant evaluator and the AES was not achieved until early August 2015. This

¹⁹ Saunders et al., 2018; Gandy, 2024

²⁰ AES, 2013

²¹ Gollan & Stacey, 2021

left approximately 4 weeks to draft the evaluation plan, prepare materials and organise logistics, before the conference start date in on 16 September.

Potential limitations of the post-conference survey included: (a) the extent to which the sample was representative of the whole delegate cohort given that participation was entirely voluntary; (b) Q32 (*Level of expertise in evaluation*) relied on self-assessment of skill, resulting in possible inconsistencies due to differing views on what constitutes expertise; (c) the 0-10 Likert scale provided limited guidance, resulting in uncertain interpretation of the responses.

The number of survey responses (n=290) was very similar to the number of responses in 2023, however the number of registrations was a third more in 2024 compared to 2023. Given the profession of the people at the conference, one would expect more support for the post-conference survey. Perhaps the aes25 evaluation team should consider strategies to improve response rates, such as a chance to win their 2026 conference registration.

AES members who did not attend the conference were not considered by the evaluation. They were invited to take part in the post conference survey, but none did. Since their views may be useful to inform future conference design, it is recommended a different approach be employed to capture the views of this group.

Evaluation plan

KEQ	Research question	Indicators	Data source: collection method
KEQ1: How valuable was the conference for the range of delegates?	1.1 What are the characteristics of delegates who attended the conference?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sector / industry - Involvement in evaluation - Evaluation experience level - AES membership - Age / Gender / Nationality / Cultural background - Number of conferences attended - How much of this conference they attended 	Registration data Delegates: survey
	1.2. Why did delegates attend the conference?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Role at the conference - Delegates' perspectives on the importance of different elements of the conference 	Delegates: survey
	1.3 To what extent were their motivations met?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delegates' perspectives and satisfaction with different elements of the conference 	Delegates: survey
	1.4. What elements of the conference were most valued?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conference organisation elements with highest degree of delegate satisfaction - Conference presentations with highest degree of delegate satisfaction - Aspects of presentations with highest degree of delegate satisfaction - Delegates' perspectives on balance of elements 	Delegates: survey
	1.5. What elements of the conference were least valued?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conference organisation elements with lowest degree of delegate satisfaction - Conference presentations with lowest degree of delegate satisfaction - Aspects of presentations with lowest degree of delegate satisfaction 	Delegates: survey Conference APP
	1.6. To what extent did delegates perceive the conference as a good use of time and money?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delegates' perspectives on value of the conference - Delegates' perspectives on whether conference represents value for money - Source of funding for conference attendance - Extent to which delegates planning to attend future conference 	Delegates: survey

KEQ	Research question	Indicators	Data source: collection method
KEQ2: To what extent did the conference contribute to advancing the strategic priorities of the AES Board?	2.1. building cultural capacity within evaluation....? Indigenous and non-Indigenous capacity in culturally safe evaluation theory, practice and use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extent of participation by First Nations delegates compared to previous - Extent of focus on cultural capacity building within conference program - Delegates’ perspectives on the balance of presentations by Indigenous evaluators - Number of CSG recipients compared to previous years - CSG recipients’ perception of ability to share culturally safe evaluation 	Document: aes24 Conference program Delegates: survey,
	2.2. ...support clear and professional career pathways in evaluation? Promote excellence in evaluation practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extent to which delegates formed professional connections - Extent to which delegates believe the conference promotes excellence in evaluation practice - Extent to which delegates left the conference feeling part of a professional network - Interviews with conference presenters 	Delegates: survey Presenters: interviews
	2.3. ...represent vitality of the AES—meeting diverse member needs today and into the future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proportion of new and returning delegates - Number of AES members v non-members - Extent to which delegates felt the program represented breadth and diversity - Level of participation (presentations and attendance) from range of industry sectors - Proportion of new and repeat presenters - Extent to which delegates left the conference feeling invigorated and inspired 	Registration data Delegates: survey Document: AES24 Conference program
	2.4. ...building of relationships and networking—enhancing collaboration?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extent to which delegates formed professional connections - Delegates satisfaction with social and networking opportunities - Extent to which delegates connected with sponsors and exhibitors compared to 2023 - Range of industries represented amongst delegates compared to last year - Extent to which delegates attended conference for the purpose of knowledge sharing and relationship building - Extent to which delegates left the conference feeling connected - Extent to which delegates engaged on social media compared to last year 	Delegates: survey 2023 data

Table 5: Evaluation plan, adapted from the aes23 evaluation plan by Helen McInerney