aes18 International Evaluation Conference

Evaluation Report

Contents

Executive Summary

This report presents the planning, approach and findings of the evaluation of the annual international evaluation conference of the Australian Evaluation Society 'AES18'. With support from the AES as both commissioner and provider of the conference, two volunteer external evaluators were engaged to undertake the project; one (the report's author) a Master of Evaluation student.

Two key evaluation questions (KEQ) and a series of sub-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 objectives of the AES Board?

A three-phased fixed mixed method convergent design was conceptualised for the project. Data collection was undertaken both during and after the conference via interviews and an online survey post-conference with participants. The overarching purpose of the evaluation was to determine the overall *value* of the conference and to find areas for *improvement* within the conference, or AES services. The report conveys a high degree of value expressed by the evaluation community regarding participants' involvement in AES18 and positive developments towards addressing the strategic objectives of the AES.

KEQ 1 | Perceptions of Value
Insights into the strengths of AES18 were shared by interviewees and survey respondents illuminating a strong sense of satisfaction with the conference presentations, social program and general organisation of the event. Keynote presentations were a standout, and ongoing demand was evident for more skill-building and practice-based presentations, despite the enhanced focus on these elements in 2018.

Rich participant experiences articulated a strong sense of feeling well-informed following participation, particularly those who engaged in sessions on report writing, rubrics and realist axiology. There was consensus the conference offered value for money and enthusiasm extended for the affordances the conference design facilitated for both professional learning and networking. Some attention to the breadth of content and aspects of quality in presentations and delivery were reoccurring themes.

KEQ 2 | Advancement of Strategic Objectives
A great sense of optimism was shared by participants, as findings revealed progress with respect to addressing aspects of each of the five broad AES strategic objectives. Most notably, attention to *Cultural Capacity* was appraised not only for the Indigenous-focused/led presentations, but also the AES's support for Indigenous evaluators with conference grants and awards.

A stable and strong attendance by delegates employed in the Government sector continues to demonstrate the *Influence* of the Society and its capacity to promote the use of evaluation and evaluative thinking.

Consistent representation by members, a large proportion of first-time attendees, and positive intentions to join the AES and attend AES19 present an optimistic outlook in terms of *Relevance* and *Organisational Stability*. Consideration of the profile and needs/interests of the emerging member-base are possible areas for attention.

To strengthen evaluation capacity across the sector concentration on content that advances the evaluation field, provides insights into 'lessons learned' and 'practice' may evolve priorities associated with the *Professionalisation* strand of the Society's broad objectives.

This report provides a snapshot of experiences and perceptions to guide planning, improvements, and resources for the AES and the 2019 Conference Organising Committee to consider.

Introduction

This report presents the approach and findings of the evaluation of 'AES18', the annual international evaluation conference of the Australian Evaluation Society (AES).

The evaluand

The evaluand was a three-day conference from 19-21 September 2018, held in Launceston, Tasmania, Australia. The conference was preceded by two days of workshops which were beyond the project scope.

The conference is the Society's flagship event and is designed to showcase the work and expertise of evaluators; strengthen capacity and collaboration; and explore the changing context of evaluation.

The 2018 theme *'Transformations'* shaped the content and design which comprised 110 sessions including five Plenary and 105 Concurrent. Sessions were aligned to sub-themes and delivered in a range of formats including: Ignite[1]; Interactive; Long paper; Panel; Short paper; and Skill building sessions. Four social events were held commencing with a Welcome Reception and concluding with a Networking lunch.

Evaluation purpose

The AES was both the commissioner and evaluand (conference) provider. The overarching purpose of the evaluation was to determine the overall *value* of the conference and to find areas for *improvement* (within the conference, or AES services).

Stakeholders' interests and information needs directed a focus on participants' experiences (as opposed to presenters).

Project stakeholders

Two volunteer evaluators were engaged by the AES as external evaluators. The evaluation was led by Master of Evaluation student-evaluator Emily MacKay with support from fellow volunteer (graduate Penny Smallwood MEval *Melb.* who assisted with survey refinements and administration, and initial quantitative analysis). An Evaluation Fellow John Stoney, AES President was appointed to provide project guidance. Other key stakeholders engaged were the primary intenders users including Conference Conveners (Jess Dart and Dan Borg), the 2019 Organising Committee, and Board members.

Key evaluation questions (KEQ)

Following scoping sessions, two KEQ were proposed:

1. How valuable was the conference for the range of delegates?

2. To what extent did the conference contribute to advancing the strategic objectives of the AES Board?

A suite of sub-questions supplemented the KEQ (see Appendix A).

Findings reported represent survey and interview respondents' feedback and are not necessarily generalisable to the whole delegate cohort.

---

[1] Five-minute presentations using 20 slides that auto-advance every 15 seconds (see conference website for other formats).

Methods and Methodology

This section is structured around key elements of the Rainbow Framework (BetterEvaluation, 2014) as they relate to the methodological choices and methods.

**<u>Define</u> and <u>Frame</u> the evaluation boundaries**
An evaluation plan was drafted to define the evaluand and how it would be evaluated including data collection methods, draft instruments, and deliverables (see Appendix A). Specifically, the presentation of a plan aimed to facilitate stakeholders' feedback prior to the conference commencement and data collection. This was an intentional step to apply the principles of Utilisation Focused Evaluation from the outset to build a working relationship with the intended users.

The plan outlined draft KEQ and sub-questions, and each were mapped to the methods/instruments i.e. the interview protocol and survey outline, depending the most appropriate method for retrieving the information. KEQ were agreed following feedback. Key areas of interest emerged following seven scoping sessions with AES stakeholders:

- Confirming member value and understanding rationale for attending
- Supporting the needs/interests of the diverse range of participants
- Meeting/advancing AES's strategic objectives, particularly cultural capacity and relevancy
- Determining effectiveness of changes/improvements from previous years.

A three phased project was conceptualised, utilising a fixed mixed method convergent design (Creswell and Piano Clark, 2017) for the purpose of triangulation and complementary (Greene, 2007). According to Creswell and Piano Clark (2017), in this case, where the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods (interviews and post-conference online survey) was pre-determined at the commencement of the research process, and the techniques implemented as planned, the design constitutes a fixed mixed methods design. The diagram below illustrates the convergent design, and broadly the methodological approach undertaken.

Figure 1. Mixed Method Convergent Design

Source: Creswell and Plano Clark (2017)
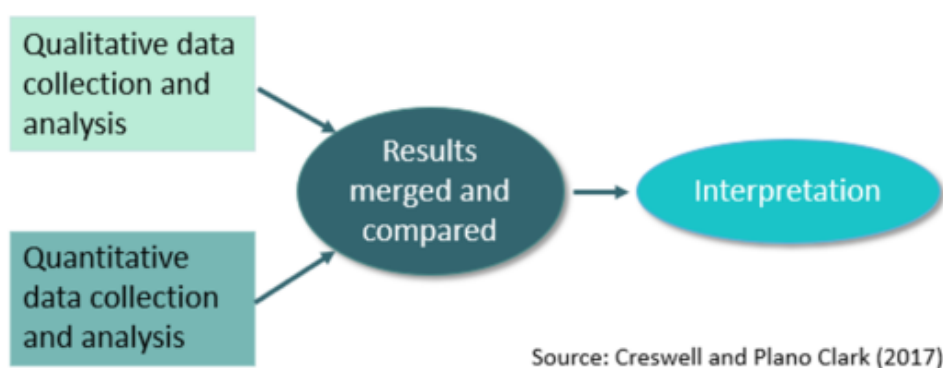
<u>Describe</u> the activities and unit of analysis

Phase 1 | Pre-conference (21 August – 18 September)	Phase 2 | During-conference (19-21 September)	Phase 3 | Post-conference (22 September – December/January)
• Document review • Stakeholder engagement • Evaluation Plan	• Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with (any) delegates • Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with (target) emerging evaluators	• Debrief with conveners • Online survey with all delegates • Data analysis and report writing

The **collection and retrieval** through a mixed methods convergent design was adopted to bring together the qualitative data from the interviews with both the quantitative and qualitative data from the online survey and compare the results to garner a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, and to validate the different sets of findings.

The **unit of analysis** and **sampling** was agreed: a focus on participant experiences. A level of interest in 'emerging' evaluators' experiences was expressed with respect to a perceived need to understand ideas applicable to advancing the AES's strategic objectives of *relevance* and *organisational sustainability*. Non-probability convenience sampling was used for the interviews and the population of conference delegates (N=423) invited to undertake the survey.

The **online survey** was adapted from AES17 and a draft provided in the evaluation plan in phase 1; it was refined post-conference in consultation with the AES18 conveners (See Appendix B). The survey was tested and launched on 8 September 2018 via the online tool, Survey Monkey.

Interview protocols, for 'emerging' evaluators and 'general delegates' were developed in phase 1 and a plain language statement and consent form prepared (see Appendix A). Ten interviews were conducted, and audio recorded during phase 2. Informal **observations** and note-taking were undertaken throughout AES18 to capture aspects that may help understand findings.

A **debrief video-conference** was held on 27 September to reflect and to clarify next steps.

Data was **analysed** separately then combined as per the convergent design using a combination of First/Second cycle coding and sorting techniques (Miles, Huberman and Saldaäna, 2014). Interviews were transcribed using an online audio-to-text transcription service 'Temi' and extensively edited to correct countless misinterpretations. Quantitative survey data was analysed using automated charts from Survey Monkey and re-worked in Excel. Where trend data was available from AES17 this was merged with the AES18 data in Excel. Qualitative data (survey/interview) was analysed in various charting and mapping tables to aid data display and synthesis.

Synthesise data

Data was synthesised and cross-referenced against elements of 2017 data where appropriate. This process was undertaken manually using a process of coding, sorting and indexing data; and categorisation into themes and identifying patterns in Excel. The 'charting' stage of the 'Framework' approach (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002) was applied for its affordances of abstraction and synthesis.

This approach to synthesis was considered effective as substantive repetition and cohesion was evident across the qualitative data. This enabled an efficient yet rigorous approach to consolidate ideas and report on findings, whilst embedding an audit trail to enhance validity and reliability.

Report and support use

The raw survey data was provided to AES stakeholders predominantly to inform the AES19 committee as planning was already underway. Additional visual data (not identified in the pre-conference stage) including photographs and cartoons has been incorporated into the reporting to illuminate and reinforce information communicated by participants and presenters. A presentation to the Board on 24 November shared high-level findings and facilitated post-conference discussion and reflection.

Ethical considerations and limitations

The Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations (AES, 2013) and the Code of Ethics (AES, 2013) were consulted during project planning and throughout execution to ensure practice conformed with proper conduct and fairness and adhered to the *propriety* standard (JCSEE, 2014). Issues such as

informed consent, data collection and access, confidentiality, privacy, acknowledgement of contributors, and cultural competence were respectfully considered.

Several limitations should be considered when reflecting on the findings particularly as they relate to the theoretical framework and the methodology/methods. In terms of the convergent design, the sampling approach and size are important factors. Neither the survey nor the interview sample can be considered representative. Therefore, results cannot be generalised to the entire population of conference delegates. Triangulation of the data across methods does appear to suggest complementarity however as interviewees may have also completed the survey some respondents' feedback may be magnified. Furthermore, there was great similarity between the survey and interview questions since merging text and numerical data is a necessary element in a convergent design. As such both the quantitative and qualitative data needed to address the same concepts, potentially restricting the breadth of the evaluation.

The subjectivity associated with online surveys meant that responder bias is inherent in the findings and in respondents' self-evaluation of their level of evaluation expertise.

Determining importance of indicators or criteria of merit was not an explicit aspect of the scoping sessions in phase 1. This meant that whilst the KEQ guided the evaluation focus areas, there was not a clear indication of how to approach synthesis, and which of the two KEQ and their associated sub-questions would be of most interest to the intended users.

At a Glace - conference participation and perceptions

This snapshot relates to delegates who responded to the online post-conference survey.

Who – participants and respondents?

The AES has a membership base of approximately 940. The conference was attended by approximately 423 delegates, 148 of whom responded to the post-conference survey, a response rate of 32%; 10 delegates participated in interviews.

Age: 30-49 64% | 50-64 23% | 18-29 7% | 65+ 5%
Gender: female 74% | male 26%
First nations: no 90% | yes 10%
AES Member: yes 71% | no but considering 24% | not interested 5%

Where – country of residence / work sector?

Where from: Australia 89% | Other 11%

Sector: Govt. 42% | Community 18% | Private 17% | Uni 14% | Other 9%

Why – attended?

#1 Acquisition of practical ideas
#2 Networking
#3 Acquisition of theoretical knowledge

What – experience?

Main involvement: Designing or conducting evaluations 60% | Commissioning contracting-out evaluation projects 14% | Teaching 8% | Studying 5% | Other 13%
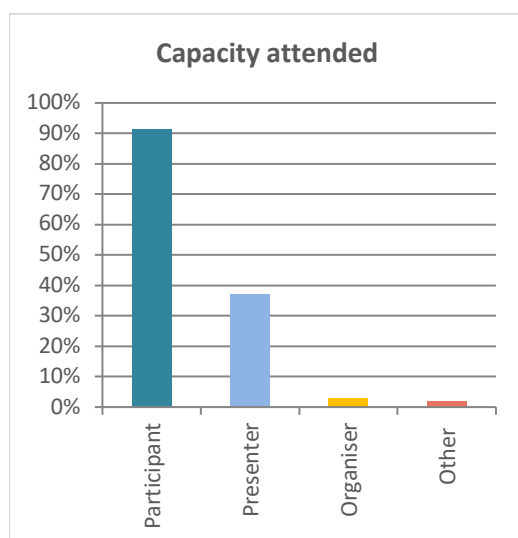
Capacity attended

Figure 2. Capacity attended

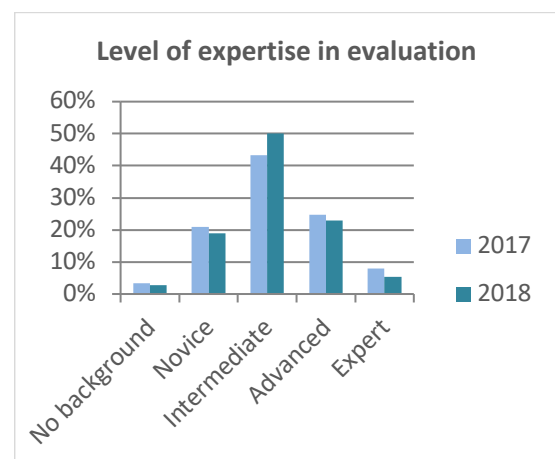**Level of expertise in evaluation**

Figure 3. Level of evaluation expertise

Evaluation Findings

The findings presented in this report are based on delegate responses to the online survey and interviews.

Perceptions of Value – **KEQ 1**

There was overwhelming support from respondents following participation in AES18 with **97%** expressing the conference was **valuable** [SQ3]. Reflecting upon leaving the conference, participants reported feeling [SQ4]:

- **INSPIRED 74%** (strongly agree or degree), an improvement on 2017 (67%)

- **INFORMED 90%** (strongly agree or agree)

- **Professionally SATISFIED 82%** (strongly agree or agree), an improvement on 2017 (78%)

- Part of a **professional COMMUNITY 78%** (strongly agree or agree).

Composition of sessions

AES18 was designed with a strong focus on interactivity, skill building and participation. On balance, participants reported the proportion of sessions for each format and broad focus area was 'about right' [SQ6]. Participants did however indicate a preference for **more skill building sessions** (48%), and **presentations on practice** (52%), despite the enhanced focus on these elements.

Figure 4. Conference elements of which respondents wanted either more or less
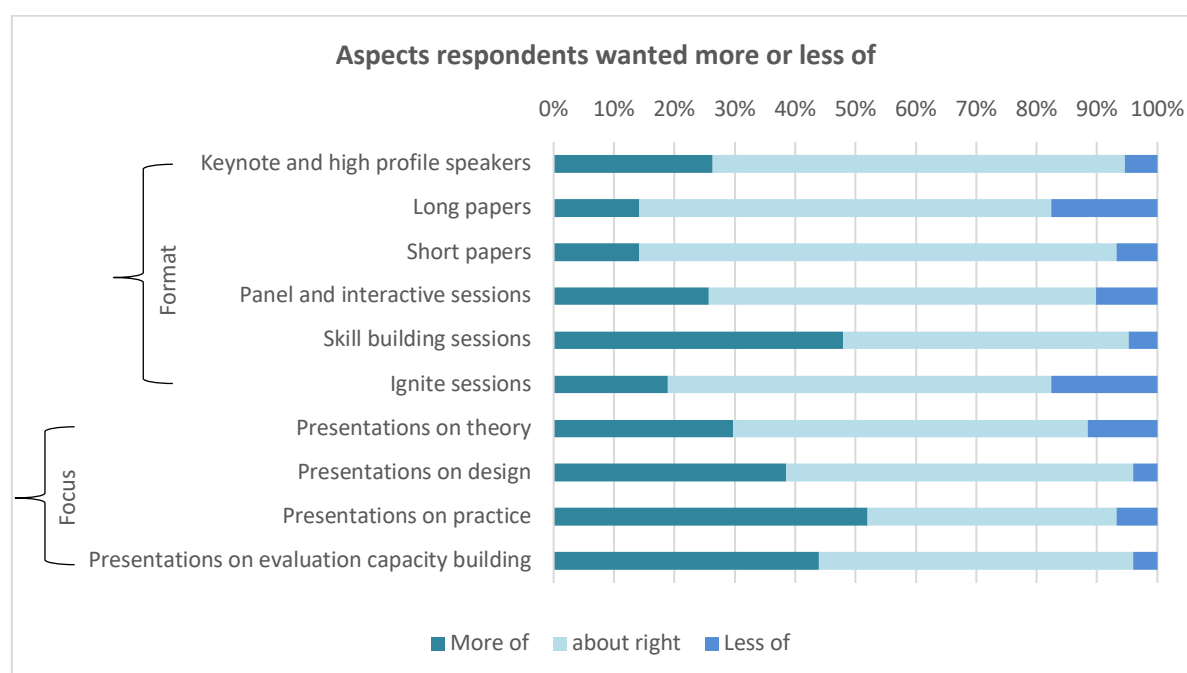
Comments suggested a **greater sense of clarity** was needed regarding the conference aspects referenced in this question. Several reoccurring remarks noted a clearer distinction between long and short papers, and better demarcation between skill sessions and interactive sessions. This will be discussed in the section *Future Conference Ideas*.

Satisfaction with presentations

Strong satisfaction was noted across the key aspects of the presentations [SQ7], reporting similar findings to AES17. **Keynotes** received the **highest satisfaction levels** with 89% of respondents either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' (87% AES17), followed by 83% very/satisfied with the breadth (82% AES17)

and quality of presentations (73% AES17), and 78% very/satisfied with the length of presentations (71% AES17).

Many of the 42 comments [SQ7] offered constructive feedback relating to the length, breadth and quality of presentations (for length 21% of respondents were either neutral/dissatisfied, and 16% for breadth and quality respectively).

Figure 5. Respondents' perceptions of satisfaction with conference presentations
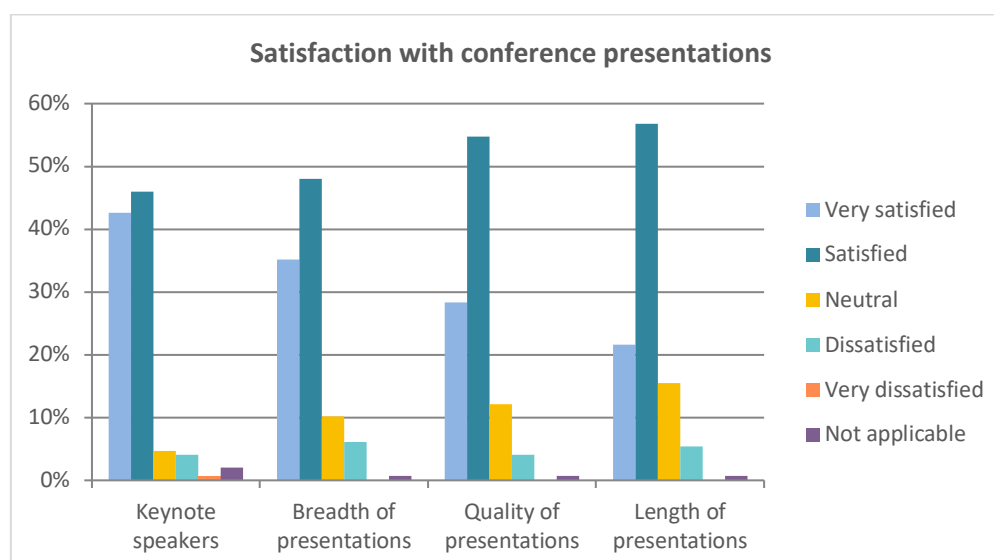
Illustrative comments which capture common themes include:

Length | "*Good time keeping is critical for the short papers and especially the 'ignite' sessions. There is some room to improve here."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', Non-member, 4 conferences attended]

Breadth | *"The emphasis has gone away from discipline and context - and that is necessary as the field of evaluation has developed and found so much to talk about. Although evaluation is a cross-disciplinary practice, there are still issues around particular contexts - particularly in terms of measurement of outcomes … could also be good to have some breadth around the complex disciplines we cover."* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES member, >5<10 conferences attended]

Quality | *"The quality of presenters/presentation styles was mostly pretty high, but I felt like the actual content of a number of presentations fell short of expectations. This was particularly where the presentation and the abstract differed, and in a number of the presentations where there was a group interactive element which felt like it missed the mark."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', Non-member, 2 conferences attended]

Value of presentations
'Acquisition of practical ideas' was the leading reason why people attended AES18 with 89% reporting this was 'extremely' or 'very important'. Consequently, it was unsurprising that 110 qualitative responses from the question 'Which presentations were most valuable and why?' [SQ8] were yielded. The Word cloud in Figure 6 presents at a glance the most frequently cited words and phrases.

Figure 6. Word cloud for the most valuable presentations and why

(NB. the larger text represents a higher number of mentions)

Analysis revealed **keynote presentations** were considered **most valuable** with 45% of the comments referencing either keynotes in general, or specific presenters; Michael Quinn Patton the most frequently cited with some mixed reflections, albeit mostly positive, followed by Penny Hagen who received only high praise. The following remarks describe the strengths in frequently cited 'most valuable' presentations:

Keynotes | *"All keynote presentations - followed by morning tea so we could discuss the content with colleagues. The importance of it being keynote was that it was shared content providing an opportunity for delegates to learn and share responses together"* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES-member, 2 conferences attended]

Keynote presentations aside, the three sessions repeatedly cited as 'most valuable' were:

Evaluation reports: Writing, editing and wrangling Word (Ruth Pitt)
"…This session was very informative and the presenter was excellent in her delivery in providing practical advice. Everyone I spoke to at this session felt the same, and I wish it had of actually been a bit longer. More sessions like this providing practical advice and examples we can use are so beneficial." [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', Non-member, first conference attended]

Evaluative rubrics: A tool for making explicit evaluative judgements (Kate McKegg, Nan Wehipeihana)
"Evaluation rubrics … - very practical and the post-talk questions were illuminating." [Participant/Presenter: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES-member, 3 conference attended]

Realist axiology: A realist perspective on 'valuing' in evaluation (Gill Westhorp)
"…Realist Axiology was the most valuable for me because of all the sessions I attended it was the only session where advancing the evaluation discipline (theory, methodology, methods & practice) was discussed." [Participant/presenter: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', Non-member, 3 conference attended]

Presentations which focused on practice relating to **Indigenous evaluation** and **cultural accountability** were appraised, and other highly valued presentations included those with a focus on **surveys**, **practice**, and **principles**. **Ignite** presentations were well received but not as well attended as others.

Ignite | *"Ignite sessions were a great addition this year! All presentations were valuable however it depended more on the quality of the presentation rather than the length, e.g. some of the ignite sessions were able to convey a key message which was more than I got out of some of the long papers."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', Non-member, 3 conferences attended]

Value for money

Most respondents reported value for money [SQ11] and reported their participation was predominantly supported financially by their employer. Seven respondents did refer to the cost suggesting it was becoming prohibitive, particularly with a regional location. There were several comments that alluded to the perception that some of the content seems to be on rotation which may be an area for attention in the future.

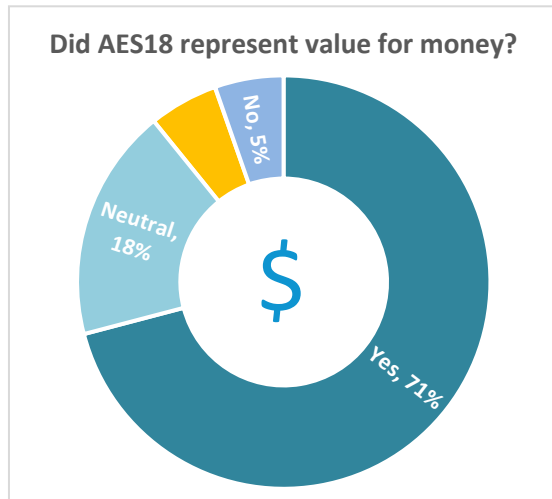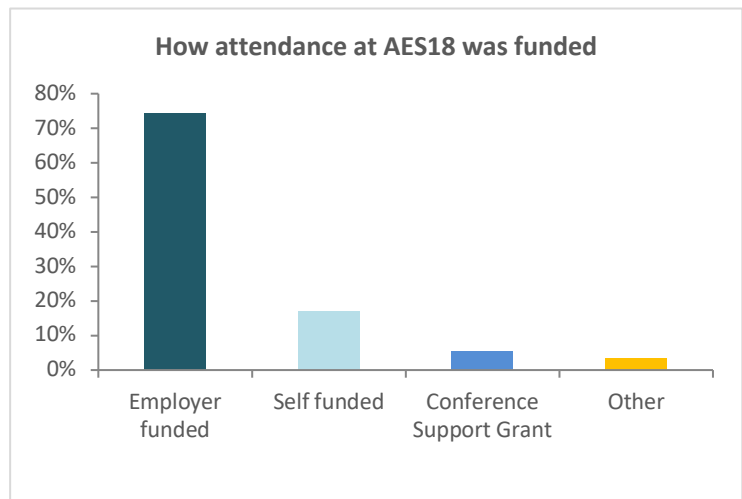Figure 7. Perceptions of value for money

Figure 8. Funding source for attendance

Did AES18 represent value for money?

No, 5%
Neutral, 18%
Yes, 71%

How attendance at AES18 was funded

Employer funded | Self funded | Conference Support Grant | Other

Location | *"I understand the value in having the conference in Tasmania, but the location did make it almost too expensive to justify going. I know attendees from Western and South Australia also had to tag on additional days on both ends to allow for travel times which added extra expense in accommodation."* [Participant: self-reported 'Novice', AES-member, first conference attended]

Content | *"To justify the expense (as a self-employed consultant) I'll definitely be looking to the program at future conferences to ascertain that there will be new and different content, in order to justify the expense."* [Participant/Presenter: self-reported 'Advanced', AES-member, 4 conferences attended]

*Advancement of Strategic Objectives – **KEQ 2***
Cultural Capacity

This section of the report focuses on perspectives shared by survey and interview respondents relating to cultural capacity and indigenous-focussed elements of AES18.

Reflections
Intentions to embed a focus on strengthening cultural capacity within the conference program and broad 'Transformations' theme were clearly visible. Many respondents commended these elements noting the *"focus on Indigenous evaluators was positive"* and "...*it was great to see a stronger Indigenous presence"* and thanking the organisers for **"recognising and celebrating First Nations culture and people** *in the keynotes and across the conference."*

Whilst there were no direct evaluation questions relating to sessions/content associated with cultural capacity, there was obvious consensus shared in feedback for a continued strong focus.

First Nations People
To better understand the involvement of First Nations people in the conference, a question was introduced into both the survey and interview protocol to identify participants' Indigeneity. Ten percent of survey respondents and 1% of survey participants identified as a First Nations person – language used for this question was endorsed by an AES Indigenous Board Member in pre-conference scoping sessions. Whilst there was no baseline data available to the evaluators, this data may provide a point of comparison for benchmarking delegate attendance trends in future conferences.

Building capacity
Several respondents reflected on their learning of evaluation-related concepts they intend to incorporate into their work/workplace [SQ9]. For example:

- *"the term cultural accountability - I like the no-nonsense succinctness of this and its action orientation and responsibility at a personal and process and system level. It seems more direct than the notion of cultural responsiveness which sounds a bit passive"*

- *"approaches for evaluation with Indigenous people, programs, projects"*

- *"reframing the notion of evaluation when working with Aboriginal communities... how to design from their point of view"*

- *"...strengthening Indigenous-led evaluation practice and Indigenous / Non-Indigenous partnerships in evaluation process."*

- *"principles for working with Indigenous cultures"*

These notations illustrate the development of cultural competencies within evaluation competencies – a key aim for this AES strategic priority.

Cultural Capacity

Strengthen and build Indigenous and non-Indigenous capacity in culturally safe evaluation theory, practice and use

"...I am specifically interested in that aspect of transformational practice - by that I mean how we (from the dominant ideological position) can understand practice for its capacity to make a difference for indigenous peoples."

Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES-member, 2 conferences attended]
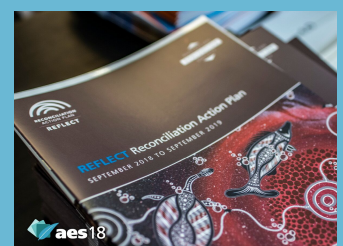
A suggestion shared by an international delegate drew attention to the importance of place and the context within which the conference was located. The following feedback presents an idea to more visibly recognise local context and support Chairs/presenters to model context-specific, culturally appropriate competencies.

> **Local context |** *"I felt the **information desk had inadequate information about the local indigenous people.** I asked for information about them as I was chairing a session and wanted to be able to speak well but was told by the person on the desk that they did not know. **I felt it should have been in the conference book** as they were invisible other than when speakers made paid their respects and that felt superficial at times. **This was at odds with the intention of the respects paid when there was so little information available.** It was particularly tricky for me as I am not from Australia and was looking to learn more."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES-member, 2 conferences attended]

Keynotes

There were six positive references to the keynote **Cultural accountability** in evaluating Aboriginal initiatives and programs (Sharon Gollan and Kathleen Stacey) in relation to the question of 'most valuable' presentation [SQ8]. As an example:

> **Modelling |** *"All the keynote presentations as they were useful for big picture thinking and considering aspects of evaluation from different perspectives (not just evaluators). In particular, the session … on **cultural accountability** which **effectively challenged understandings of power and privilege and modelled first-hand a respective working partnership between a First Nations person and non-Indigenous person**."* [Presenter: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES-member, 2 conferences attended]

In contrast however, an interviewee made comment about the absence of specific concrete examples:

> **Examples to enlighten |** *"I've been disappointed by the extent to which **presenters have not given examples of what they're talking about.** Let me give you an example. The opening session today repeatedly referenced beautifully the distinction that might exist in a particular setting between an indigenous value or practice and a dominant culture value or practice. **But the speakers did not give any, many, examples of what is a dominant culture practice,** and yet the majority of the people in the room were from the dominant culture, and **it didn't enlighten us into what the speaker was talking about were the dominant culture practices and values that might get in the way of creating a safe space** for people who weren't members of the dominant culture. **Without concrete examples, general talk is just advertising."*** [Interviewee | Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES-member, all conferences attended]

A similar observation was noted by the student-evaluator in another keynote session. In questions posted live in Slido (an audience interaction tool), participants queried the meaning of Māori terms being used.

Influence

Influencing agencies and organisations to use evaluation and evaluative thinking to improve policies and practices is a key AES imperative. The conference and social program (particularly the awards elements of the Gala Dinner), and the engagement and support of exhibitors are central aspects of the AES's strategy to connect evaluators and allied professionals with local/international practitioners and thought leaders to enhance thinking, momentum and change on specific issues within the field.

The extent to which the AES is connecting with a broad span of the employment sector is illustrated in Figure 9. A similar profile to AES17 in terms of organisational reach was apparent. The sector most represented was Government with 42% (State or Local 26% and Federal 16%), followed by Community or not-for-profit (NFP) 18%, and Private sector/consultancy 17%. Almost identical profiles were evident for 2017 and 2018 regarding the main way participants/presenters are engaged in evaluation. 'Designing or conducting evaluations' continues to be the main way, followed by 'Commissioning or contracting-out evaluation projects.
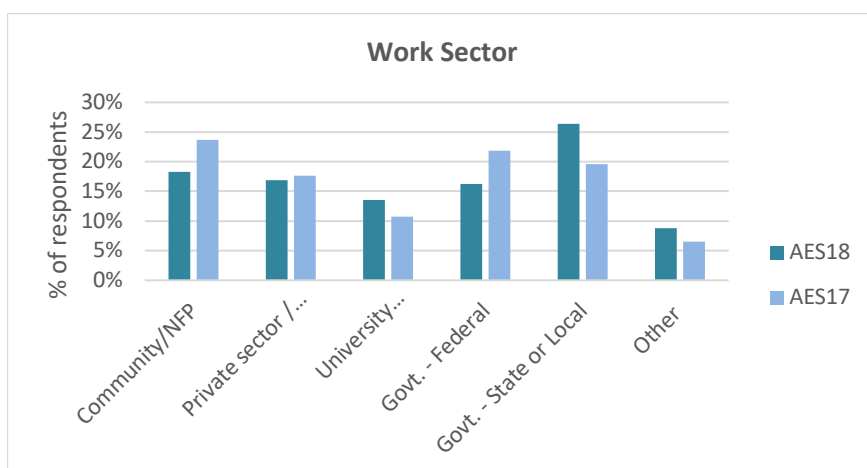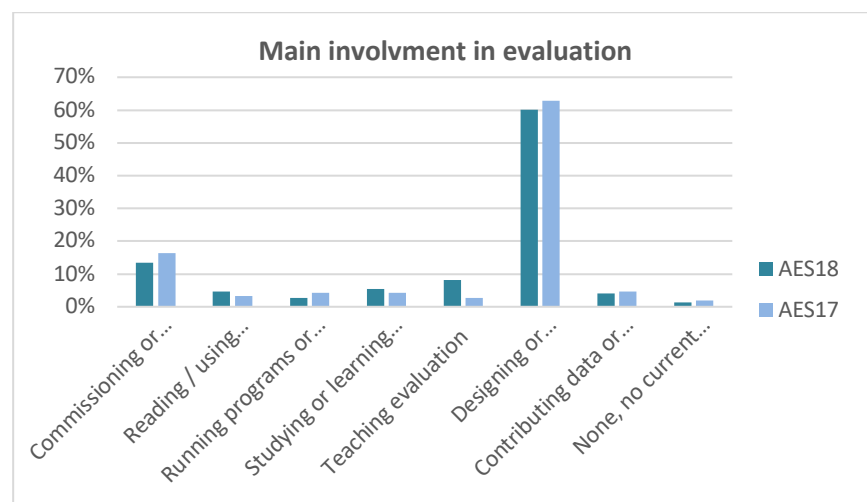
Figure 9. Work sector of survey respondents

Figure 10. Main involvement in evaluation

Government influence

The importance of a culture of evaluation in the Australian Public Service is a key message of the AES and this was reiterated at the conference by the strong presence of Government employees' involvement as both participants, and presenters.

The presentations by those working predominantly in the Government sector were well received, demonstrating positive promotion of the use of evaluation and evaluative thinking. Several comments below relate to the question regarding which presentations were 'most valuable':

- *"I really enjoyed 'Principles before Rules' -* Stefan Kmit*, Australian Department of Child Protection South Australia - for the practical aspects and the articulation of barriers identified and how they are being overcome."*
  [Participant/Presenter: Govt. State/Local, role in evaluation - Contributing data or information to evaluations]

- *"Commonwealth Performance framework - relevant to my work and an easy way to get updates on learnings"*
  [Participant: Govt. State/Local, role in evaluation - Designing or conducting evaluations]

- *"The session on 'Evaluation Ready: Transforming government processes and ensuring evaluability' was most useful for me - so useful to hear how other agencies have approached the challenges of wrangling evaluation in government"*
  [Participant: Govt. State/Local, role in evaluation - Reading / using evaluation reports and findings]

- *"I really enjoyed the Panel on 'Internal Government M&E Units'…"*
  [Participant/Presenter: Community/NFP, role in evaluation - Commissioning or contracting out evaluation projects]

Relevance

Understanding the value proposition of membership is a key area of the *Relevance* strand of the Society's strategic objectives. It was apparent that most respondents were members, and a similar profile of membership status for interviewees was evident.

Figure 11. Membership status of survey respondents

Membership status of survey respondents
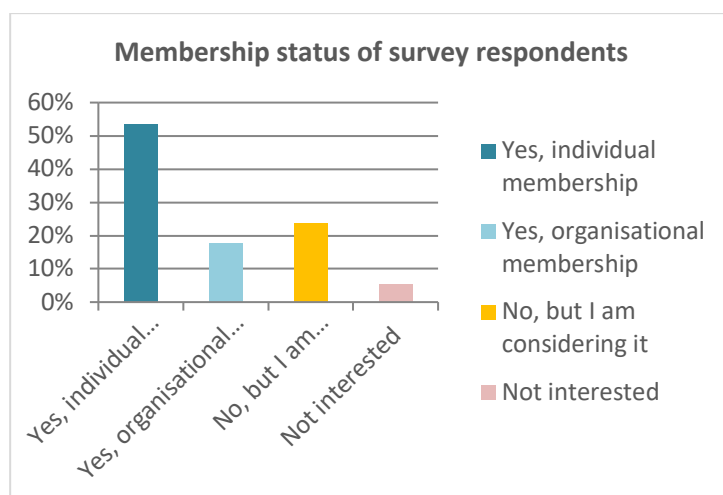
Positive conference experiences appear to have influenced delegates' perceptions of the value of membership with the association. Of the 10 interviewees, five were non-members – four of whom were considering joining following their involvement in AES18. A similar optimistic pattern is emerging with intentions to attend AES19 – strong indications to participate were shown from members (see Figure 17) in the section on *Organisational Stability*.

Barriers and enablers
Interviewees were asked about the barriers/enables that may influence their intentions to join/stay a member of the AES, to present at a future conference, or to attend AES19[IQ10 EE/7 G].

Responses were unsurprising with the central factor relating to cost and work financing participation; and approval for time-off work. Interestingly, two interviewees commented a **key enabler** was the **theme**, noting *"'Transformations' was an attractive theme"*; another suggested that their return and/or consideration to present may be influenced by the theme, for example *"a theme that I would relate to, a conference theme that I would find interesting or relate to…and then that would also influence, I guess whether I present or not."*

These were two of the few times the conference theme was mentioned throughout the evaluation. A presenter also drew attention to the theme stating *"…Overall I didn't find too many of the presentations aligned with the lofty conference theme".* These comments draw attention to consideration of the relevance and intentions of the theme and its potential influence on expectations.

Relevance

Strengthen the value proposition of AES membership

"For me I probably would have valued more time, or a stream or something that is about practice. Like thinking about the Journal, there's the practice paper…"

[Interviewee | Participant/Presenter: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', AES-member, first conference attended]

Emerging evaluators

Understanding the needs of the emerging/potential membership base was touched on in interviews with most interviewees feeling the conference breadth and depth of content, with the simultaneous tracks, was diverse enough to cater to a wide range of delegates' needs/interests from learning about the principles of evaluation to collecting and analysing data and presenting information.

Survey respondents shared reflections on their observations of the support for emerging evaluators:

- *"Perhaps there is too many at the AES with over 100 sessions but I can see there is a very good reason for having more presentations as it provides a space for dialogue among peers and more importantly an opportunity for emerging evaluators to have a voice. It's more democratic having more presentations, but the other side of this is that the presentations are not always high value / quality."* [Participant/Presenter: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES-member, >5<10 conferences attended]

- *"Some of the emerging evaluator sessions as I learned about challenges other emerging evaluators experience and how to overcome them and also joined an online group."* [Participant/Presenter: self-reported 'Intermediate', AES-member, first conference attended]

- *"There might have been a bit too much of a focus on emerging evaluators. I think it would have been good to have a few more debates or new ideas being brought into the mix."* [Participant/Presenter: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES-member, 2 conferences attended]

Exploring further the reasons for attending, and emerging needs and interests

Figure 12. Reasons for attending: Members and Non-members
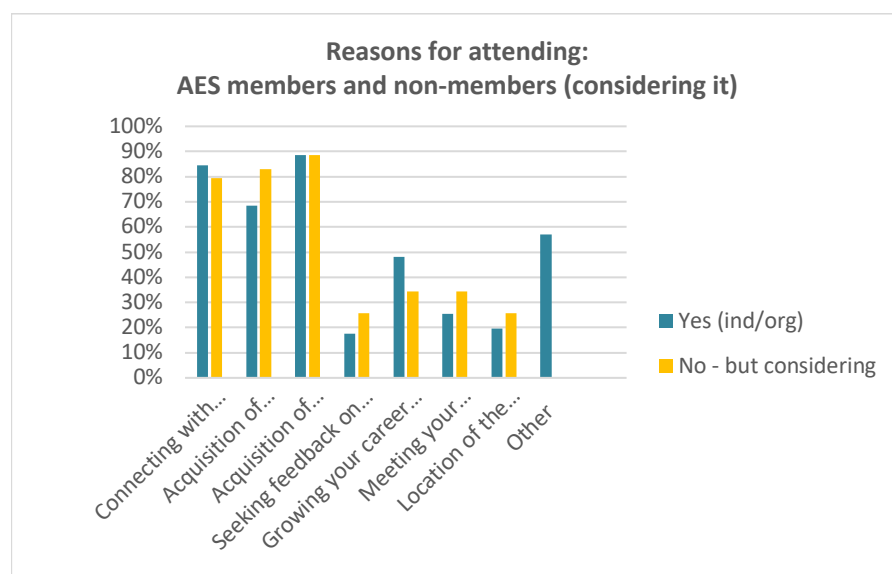

As noted earlier, 'acquisition of practical ideas' was the leading reason for all respondents for attending the conference. The second and third most-important reasons varied for different cohorts of respondents, despite the same factors being evident. Non-members (who are considering joining) noted 'acquisition theoretical knowledge' (83%) was the second most important reason, followed by 'connecting with people who are interested in similar things' (networking) (79%). In the case of members however, 'networking' was the second most important (85%), followed by 'acquisition theoretical knowledge' (69%) as shown in Figure 12.

Meeting the needs of delegates – session format and broad content area

Figure 4 in the section on *Perceptions of value*, noted that respondents were mostly satisfied with the composition of sessions but indicated a preference for more skill building sessions, and presentations on practice. To better understand the emerging member base by level of expertise and non-member status see Figure 13. Similar trends are evident in terms of skill-building and practice, however a stronger preference for 'presentations on evaluation capacity building' was clear for delegates who identified as having no background/novice-level expertise, and the category of non-member.

Figure 13. Aspects respondents wanted more of (by expertise and non-membership status)
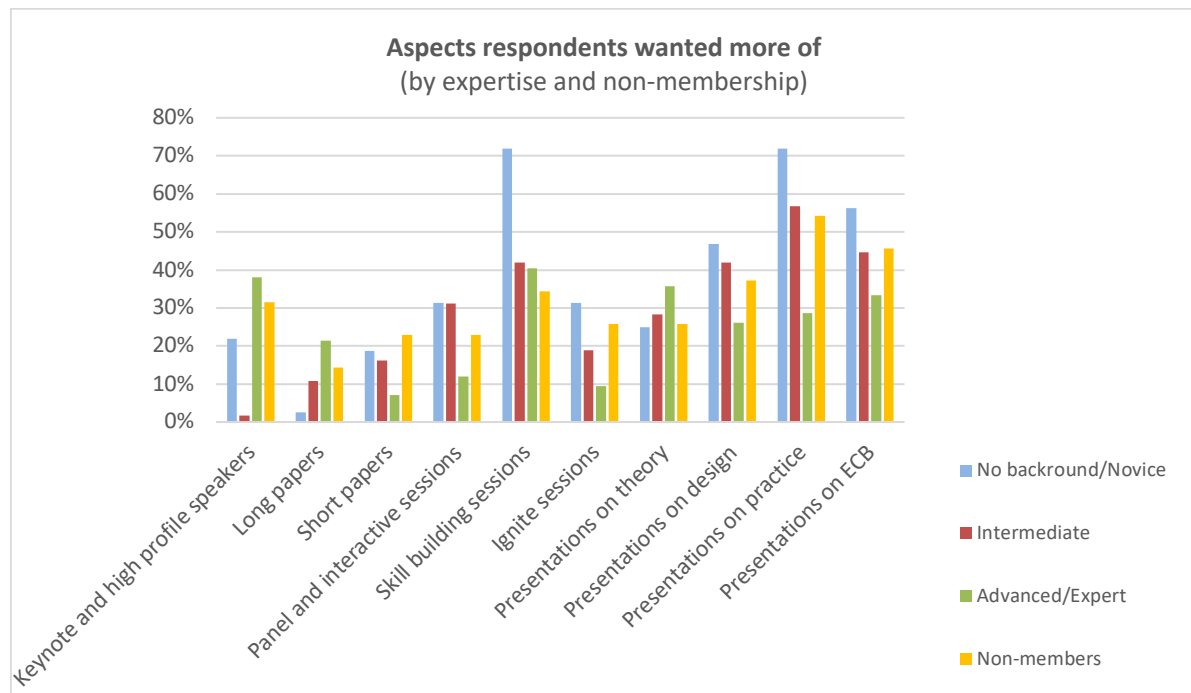
Networking

References to networking were a common theme throughout the interviews and survey. Many respondents commended the conference design for the affordances it offered for networking, but there were also numerous suggestions for additional strategies to foster engagement for different categories of delegates (e.g. employees of certain sectors, or those at different career stages.). Some comments are noted below and will be further elaborated on in the section on *Future Conference Ideas*.

- *"Sessions that encouraged interaction between attendees in the room. The more chances to meet new people the better!"*

- *"More professional networking opportunities like the Thursday lunchtime 'birds of a feather' networking opportunity on NRM evaluation, participatory evaluation etc."*

- *"... PLEASE make easily available a delegates' list with email addresses of delegates who permit their email addresses to be published."*

- *"Would have liked an ANZEA/NZ meeting time. Would have liked a govt agencies meet and greet – e.g. Aust and NZ and any others"*

- *"I did not attend any of these [social] events as I was a first-time attendee and was there on my own so it seemed a little intimidating to me."*

Professionalisation

The conference provides the AES the opportunity to showcase the work of evaluators and the promotion and application of evaluator competencies, with the overall aim to continuously improve the quality of evaluation practice and products.

Except for two comments (noted in side-bar), there was limited reference in both the evaluation questions and the qualitative responses specifically related to aspects of this strategic priority. Nonetheless, commentary on the content and design/delivery of presentations provides helpful insights into the perceptions of respondents' experiences and potential areas for improvement to strengthen the capacity of the evaluation sector, through the conference, workshops or other AES services.

Content

There were more than 18 comments across multiple survey questions [SQ 6, 7 & 15] that related to general aspects of **content**. Common themes observed noted:

- the same topics seem to be on rotation
- not enough debate and interaction between people with different ideas and different ways of tackling a problem
- the need for greater breadth
- theoretical and vague presentations with little move into the '*So What?*'
- more detail from the presenters themselves on what they did and why as opposed to forcing interactivity.

Reoccurring ideas were presented about two content focus areas **'challenges/failure/success'** (13 references, i.e. 'lessons learned') and **'practice'** (15 references), mainly concerning facets of presentations that were 'most valuable'[SQ8]. These aspects may benefit from greater emphasis or visibility in AES19. Themes relayed from survey and interview respondents are captured in these quotes:

Lessons learned

- *"There seemed to be fewer presentations about actual evaluations, the planning, the process and the learnings - I like these as they are practical learning sessions as well."*
- *"Too little openness to what didn't work - this was modelled by some high-profile speakers…but didn't flow through to those others doing practical work so we could learn"*
- *"...Failing workshop because it's an important skill that designers can share with evaluators ..."*
- *"As an emerging evaluator, I'm keen to learn from people who've been doing it longer than I have and made mistakes already."*
- *"...It would also be great to include a 'you can't ask that' for one of the panel discussions to address some of the more challenging issues about evaluation that sometimes we're too shy to talk about."*

Practice

- *"... I think more of a balance between theory and practice would be of great benefit, as well as more sessions on bridging the theory-practice gap."*

- [More on] *"Design and Skills based – practice-based. I feel that many of us are qualified enough to understand theory but I want to see the process of choice - why would you apply a developmental evaluation as opposed to social impact an outcomes or realist? And maybe have capacity to earn unit or token towards higher level certificates. And nuts and bolts around resources so I can make decisions around how much time to allocate/people or if I need to bring in consultants and outsource."*

Quality

The quality of presentations received broad satisfaction as noted in Figure 5 (83% very/satisfied). Two particularly salient comments capture this well in response to the 'most valuable' presentations:

- *"What I really appreciated about the majority of presentations that I saw at the conference was that they were positive about solutions rather than dwelling on the problems."*

- *"Skill building sessions - Ruth Pitt (reports), Dan Borg (survey design), Adrian Field (evaluation fatigue). These were all relatable and gave me ideas about my practice. It also felt like these presenters had thoughtfully considered the experience of their audience."*

More specifically however, various dimensions of quality and alignment with abstracts may be areas for further attention. Consistent remarks were offered in the qualitative survey responses and interviews across a range of questions that related to quality (14 or more comments) and abstracts (9 comments).

Respondents' views on aspects of quality suggested a need to consider:

- incorporating greater peer review of content to ensure alignment with published abstract

- creating expectations on preparation and rehearsal including guidance on slide presentation

- elevating the content to a more advanced level to meet the needs of more experienced evaluators

- introducing more variety in the presenters

- implementing mechanisms for sharing feedback on unsuccessful abstracts.

Organisational Stability

As the conference is the main revenue stream for the AES, attracting and retaining conference delegates and ensuring value for money are key priorities.

Professional development budget allocation for AES18
Expanding on the positive value for money perceptions noted earlier, respondents indicated on average they spend 68% of their annual professional development budget towards attending the conference [SQ12] – this was a 10% increase on AES17 in Canberra, possibly due to the regional location.

New attendees or long timers?
Live-data capture during the Opening Plenary via Slido suggested that more than half the delegates who responded were attending for the first time. These observations were validated by the post-conference survey with attendance at AES18 broadly consistent with AES17. Again, most survey respondents were attending for their first time, followed next by those who had attended 2 and 3 conferences respectively [SQ25 AES18].

Figure 14. Number of conferences attended by survey respondents 2017/18
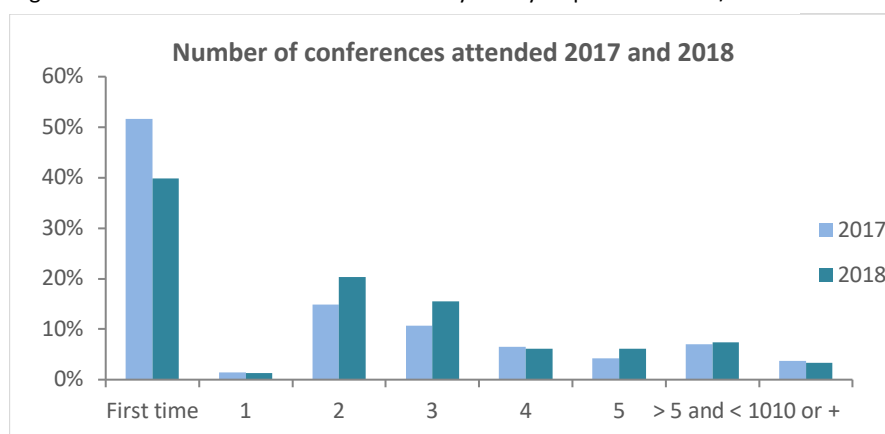
To delve deeper into the age demographics of survey respondents, the majority attending for the first time were in the age group 30-49 years (64%, n=94), followed by the 50-64 age group (23%, n=34).

Figure 15. Conferences attended and count of survey respondents in age category
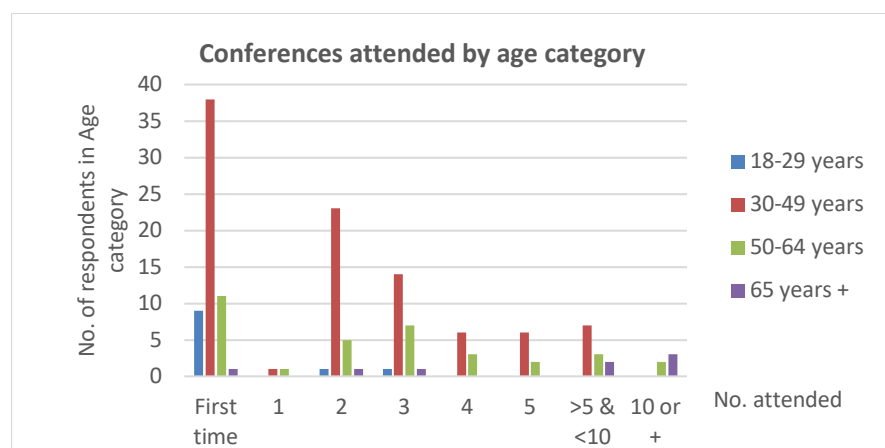
AES18 Registration

AES strategic priorities meant a smaller and less-profitable conference was intentionally planned for 2018 in Launceston. Strong demand however, resulted in an unexpected number of registrations. Whilst there was much positive commentary about the collegiate atmosphere and engaging nature of the conference, the large registration numbers presented challenges for the venue in terms of capacity and logistics. The AES would be prudent to make careful note of feedback in planning for AES19 [SQ 13-15].

A respondent's comments by way of an example:

> *"The AES should have had a cut-off on numbers attending - I know … you got significantly more people than you anticipated, which just seems money grabbing. I am very disappointed with the AES and tempted to ask for a refund…people pay a significant amount of money to attend and do not expect to stand or sit on the floor at every presentation. Very, very disappointed by this and at the AES."* [Participant/Presenter: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES-member, 2 conferences attended]. This participant has indicated they are not planning to attend in 2019.

Conference organisation

Figure 16. Satisfaction with conference organisation for AES18
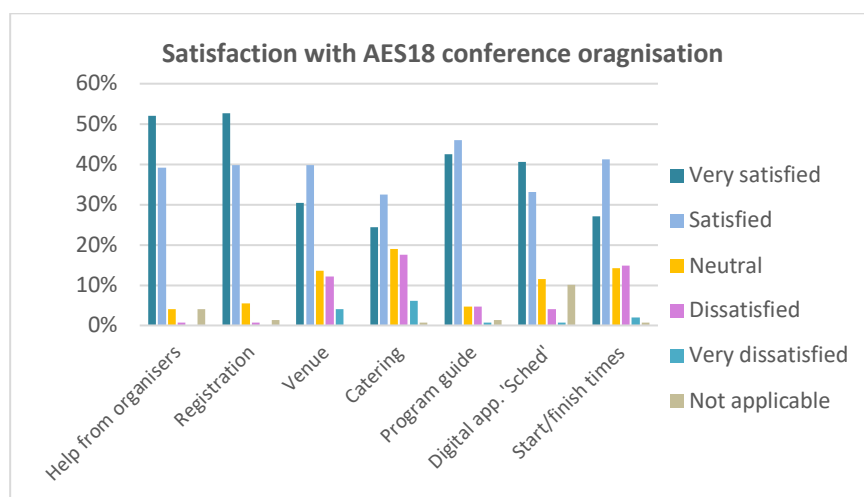
Overall, respondents were satisfied with the organisation of the conference except for the start/finish times and the limitations of the venue particularly relating to catering logistics and room capacity. An overwhelming number of respondents criticised the 8am starts.

AES19 - Sydney

When considering intentions to attend AES19 in Sydney, 56% of respondents (n=82) indicated 'yes', and 40% stated they were 'unsure' (n=59) [SQ26].

Figure 17. Intentions to attend AES19 in Sydney
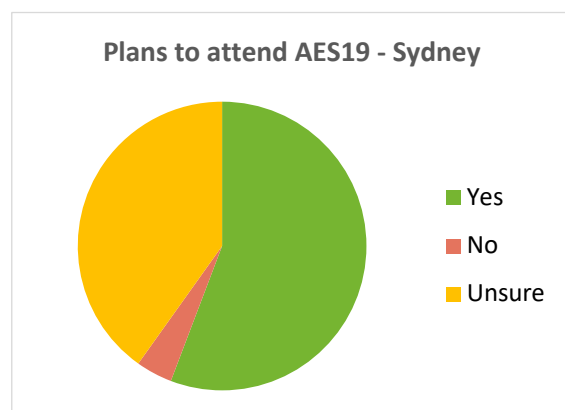
Of those who indicated **'yes'**, **58%** (n=32) attended in the capacity of **'presenter'** in 2018. The **age group** for **'yes'** respondents was predominately **30-49 years** (57%, n=47), followed by the 50-64 age group (26%, n=21). **Membership status** of those who plan to attend AES19 was **62%** with **individual membership** (n=51), **17%** with **organisational membership** (n=14), and **21%** who are non-members but **'considering it'** (n=17). Unsurprisingly, those who indicated 'unsure' were again mostly in the 30-49 years (71%, n=41), followed by the 50-64 age group (21%, n=12).

Future Conference Ideas

The evaluation community has highlighted the significant value it places on the AES conference, and the support of those involved in the organisation and their contribution towards advancement of the evaluation field and the professional aspirations of delegates.

This section revisits some of the areas noted in the report for potential improvement for AES19 and presents some of the creative suggestions, and general feedback from delegates who generously contributed their perspectives and reflections following participation at AES18 in September 2018.

Suggestions

Content, format, delivery

- **Content:** include sessions on lessons learned e.g. how things take place on the ground (i.e. challenges and successes)
- **Content:** ensure more debates, genuine interaction and new ideas are being presented to advance and challenge the profession
- **Ignites:** consider extending the Ignites by a few minutes, particularly to allow for Q&A time; ensure good timekeeping; consider posters to support presentations
- **Ignites:** consider using Ignite sessions as an "advert" for the longer presentations, whereby presenters distil key points and focus, to inform potential audience members' decisions regarding which longer presentations to attend
- **Modality:** consider complementary sessions to Ignite such as the concept of the 'Three Minute Thesis' e.g. run a few 'Three Minute Thesis' on Day 1 (or via Zoom pre-conference) and schedule a few places for the top ones to deliver a longer presentation on Day 3 of the conference
- **Timetabling:** allow for more Q&A time in timetabling for all sessions

Presenters

- **Fact-checking:** ensure those presenting on topic areas are in fact doing so, e.g. if introducing a design stream involve designers in the planning – have mechanisms/experts to check/validate content
- **Keynotes:** consider involving keynote presenters who are high profile but not necessarily with a (strong) evaluation background; engage fresh thinkers as well as underrepresented perspectives
- **Keynotes:** reintroduce a round table discussion session/s with the keynote speakers e.g. as per Brisbane conference
- **Evaluation experts:** engage local experts from Australia to have a stronger presence including AES Fellows e.g. leading debates in evaluation theory

Engagement and networking

- **Industry/organisational societies:** connect with a broader range of organisations and professional societies to elevate the AES's profile, strengthen the interdisciplinary nature of evaluation and leverage existing relationships of members e.g. Institute of Public Administration Australia, the Market Research Association, Australian Statistical Society etc.
- **Networking:** introduce a range of mechanisms/opportunities for optional networking e.g. a platform/system (like an electronic bulletin board) for updates/announcements; delegates-

list/contacts; space in the program for 'delegate-initiated' networking; a 'reflections room' for people to mingle, network and talk about issues raised at the conference

- **Volunteers:** establish an AES volunteer crew to support conference organisers
- **Event promotion:** improve promotion/communication of special events such as the Fellows meeting, Special Interest Groups (SIG) meetings, Newcomers' Breakfast (including signage where appropriate)

Program and resources

- **Digital apps:** encourage the use of digital apps such as live polls (e.g. Slido), beyond only the Plenary sessions
- **Program and communications:** consider design elements in program booklets and Sched for usability/readability to reduce feelings of being overwhelmed
- **Resources:** disseminate the slides shortly after the conference to better facilitate knowledge transfer/reporting back/capacity building
- **Sustainability:** consider more sustainable approaches to conference materials (bags, program book and insert, pens, etc.)

Organisation and logistics

- **Catering:** consider multiple rooms or break-times for lunch periods
- **Local activities:** consider offering a few optional local activities to explore the area of the conference location
- **Registration:** consider opening the registration desk on the eve of the conference and/or communicate clearly when registration will open
- **Registration:** consider capping registration to manage venue limitations and optimise participants' experience
- **Registration/sign-up:** consider using the Sched app to 'sign-up' to sessions to assist with planning and identifying popular sessions, and better facilitate room allocation for high-demand sessions
- **Seating:** continue with round tables for plenary sessions (as opposed to lecture-style) to facilitate networking and discussion
- **Special needs:** consider venue organisation to support delegates with special needs, e.g. sensory/auditory needs, access to private rooms for medical/caring/religious needs etc.
- **Timetabling:** avoid 8am starts and consider reducing the day length
- **Timetabling:** consider a shorter final day to enable interstate delegates travel time (e.g. mid-afternoon close on day 3) and/or reduce overall conference length
- **Timetabling:** schedule the Gala dinner on the eve of conference-close for more impact

General Feedback

Atmosphere: *"I loved the collegiate atmosphere that was created from the outset of the conference... What I loved about this conference was the different ways that different speakers engaged the audience - for almost every session I was not a passive observer but an active learner!"*

Cartoons: *"... I also loved the cartoonist representation of the key sessions - that crystallised the key messages in a unique way and some of them I could take back to the office and share with non-evaluators..."*

"I think it's one of the best, if not the best conference I've ever attended. I like the new format, I wondered what I'd think of it, it seems to be a much more informal and easily absorbed format."

[Interviewee | Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES-member, conferences attended since mid-80s]

References

Australasian Evaluation Society (2013). Code of Ethics. Retrieved online: https://www.aes.asn.au/images/stories/files/membership/AES_Code_of_Ethics_web.pdf

Australasian Evaluation Society (2013). Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations. Retrieved online: https://www.aes.asn.au/images/stories/files/membership/AES_Guidelines_web_v2.pdf

BetterEvaluation (2014) *Using the BetterEvaluation Rainbow Framework*. Retrieved from www.betterevaluation.org

Creswell, J., and Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). Designing and conducting mixed methods research. Retrieved from www.ebooks.com.

Greene, J. C. (2007). Mixed methods in social inquiry. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE), (2014). *Program evaluation standards statements.* Retrieved online: http://www.jcsee.org/program-evaluation-standards-statements

Kneebone, S. (2018). Cartoonist and illustrator. Engaged for the 2018 International Evaluation Conference. Launceston, Tasmania, Australia. Copyright 2018 by S. Kneebone. Used with permission.

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., and Saldaäna, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook (Third edition.)*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

Ritchie, J. and Spencer, L. (2002). Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. *The qualitative researcher's companion* (pp. 305-329). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412986274

Appendices

Appendix A – Evaluation Plan

Appendix B – Online Survey

Acknowledgements