International **Evaluation** Conference
Conference workshops 28 & 29 August
Conference 30 August–1 September
Adelaide

AUSTRALIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY

aes22 International Evaluation Conference

30 August – 1 September 2022
Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

Evaluation Report

Contents

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Executive Summary

This report presents the planning, approach and findings of the evaluation of the annual international evaluation conference 'AES22' of the Australian Evaluation Society. With support from the AES as both commissioner and provider of the conference, an independent evaluator was engaged to undertake the project.

Two key evaluation questions (KEQs) 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 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 post-conference survey 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 AES22 and positive developments towards addressing the strategic priorities of the AES.

KEQ 1 | Perceptions of Value
Insights into the strengths of AES22 were shared by interviewees and survey respondents illuminating a strong sense of satisfaction with the conference presentations, social program and general organization of the event. Keynote presentations were a standout, and ongoing demand was evident for more skill-building and interactive sessions, despite the enhanced focus on these elements in 2022.

Rich participant experiences articulated a strong sense of feeling well-informed following participation. 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, aspects of quality in presentations and content for advanced evaluators were reoccurring themes.

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

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 support the building of clear professional and career *Pathways*, enhance evaluation knowledge and expertise, and continuously improve the quality of evaluation practice in Australasia.

Consistent representation by members, a large proportion of first-time attendees, and positive

intentions to join the AES and attend AES23 present an optimistic outlook in terms of *Vitality*. Consideration of diversity and inclusion, bringing together old and new ideas and technology are areas of attention to fulfill the needs of evolving societies.

A stable and strong attendance by delegates from a range of sectors continues to demonstrate AES's focus on forming various strategic *Relationships* to strengthen the field of evaluation and support improved policy delivery and measurement of outcomes and impact.

This report provides a snapshot of experiences and perceptions to guide planning, improvements, and resources for the AES and the 2023 Conference Organising Committee to consider.

Introduction

This report presents the approach and findings of the evaluation of 'aes22', the annual international evaluation conference of the Australian Evaluation Society (AES). This conference was the first face-to-face aes conference post-COVID-19 pandemic. The last face-to-face conference was held in 2019 in Sydney.

An evaluation plan was drafted to define the evaluand and how it would be evaluated including key evaluation questions (KEQ), data collection methods and instruments, as well as deliverables.

Key evaluation areas include:

• Confirming member value and understanding rationale for attending

• Supporting the needs/interests of the diverse range of participants

• Meeting/advancing AES's strategic priorities

The evaluand

The evaluand was a three-day conference from 30 August-1 September 2022, held in Adelaide, South Australia, Australia. The conference was preceded by two days of workshops which are beyond the evaluation 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 contexts of evaluation.

The 2022 theme *'Weaving Evaluation into the Whole'* shaped the content and design of the six plenary and 91 concurrent sessions. 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. Three main social events were held during the conference including Welcome Drinks, Newcomers' Breakfast and Gala Awards Dinner.

The conference explored 'how evaluation weaves into programs and policies at community, state, and national levels', values and how practice can enhance the quality of evaluation by weaving in and reconciling the perspectives of the players involved, how evaluation adapts and weaves innovation into practice amidst acute and chronic challenges, and the growth of current and emerging evaluators as attendees learn from each other to build capacity.

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).

After two years without a face-to-face conference for the AES, there is opportunity here to explore the perspective and experience of delegates regarding:

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

- how well the conference captured its theme
- the reasons why people participated (or didn't) participate in the conference
- what stood out – the most and least valuable aspects of the conference for participants
- the effectiveness of the conference for learning – for instance, whether the conference program was able to address old and new ideas and evaluation approaches, whether the conference was inclusive, and whether the conference challenged their evaluation practice
- what they were 'taking home' to weave into their practice
- practical ways in which the conference could be improved in the future

Deliverables and Milestones

The proposed deliverables and milestones schedule is included below (Table 1). This schedule was updated as required and as agreed with AES.

Table 1. Deliverables and milestones

Deliverable	Due date
Phase 1 – Pre-conference	
Development of data collection tools	20 August 2022
Phase 2 – During conference	
Short interviews with delegates	30 August- 1 September 2022
Phase 3 – Post-conference	
Invitation to complete survey	4 September 2022
Evaluation plan	4 October 2022
AES Board brief	12 November 2022
Draft report	20 November 2022
Final report	13 December 2022

Project stakeholders

An independent evaluator, Dr Wan Yi Lee, was engaged by the AES as an external evaluator. The evaluation was led by the independent evaluator with support from the aes22 conference program co-chair, Dr Emily Saurman, who has volunteered to take on the task of coordinating the conference evaluation. Dr Saurman assisted with refinements of the data collection tools.

Other key stakeholders engaged were the primary intended users including the Conference Conveners, the 2023 Conference Organising Committee, and AES Board members.

Key evaluation questions (KEQ)

Two key evaluation questions were proposed to guide data collection, analysis and interpretation:

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

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

Methods and Methodology

Evaluation design

A three phased project was conceptualised, utilising a fixed mixed method convergent design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) for the purpose of triangulation (Greene, 2007). The three phases to the proposed evaluation design were outlined below (Table 2):

Table 2. Overview of evaluation timeline

Phase 1 | Pre-conference 25 July – 26 August	Phase 2 | During-conference 30 August – 1 September	Phase 3 | Post-conference 2 September – 15 December
• Document review • Stakeholder engagement • Development of data collection tools	• Short interviews with delegates	• Evaluation plan finalised • Online survey with all delegates • Data analysis and report writing

In this case, where the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods (short interviews and post-conference online survey) was pre-determined at the commencement of the research process, and the techniques implemented as planned, the design constituted a fixed mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The diagram below illustrates the convergent design, and broadly the methodological approach undertaken (Figure 1).

Source: Creswell and Plano Clark (2017)
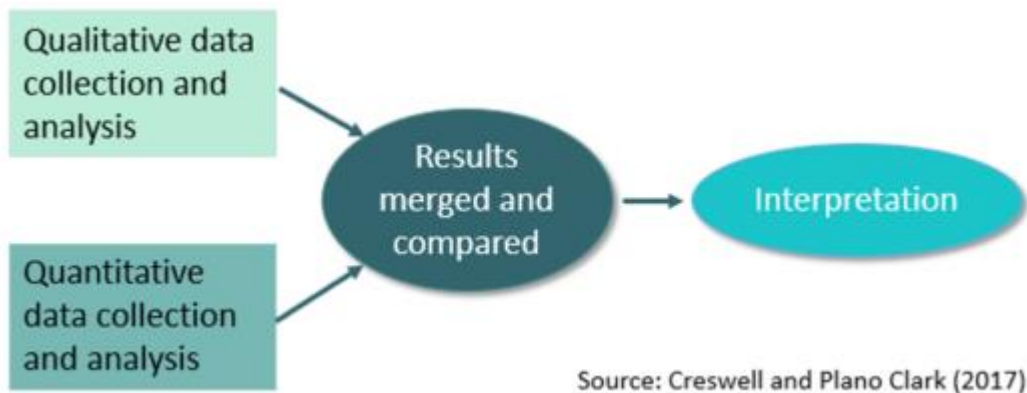
Figure 1. Mixed Method Convergent Design

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 **sampling** and **unit of analysis** was agreed: a focus on participant experiences. A level of interest in evaluators' experiences was expressed with respect to a perceived need to understand ideas applicable to advancing the AES's strategic priorities (2019-2022) of *Indigenous Culture and Diversity, Pathways, Vitality* and *Relationships*. Non-probability convenience sampling was used for the interviews and the population of conference delegates (N=544) was invited to undertake the survey.

Data collection

Eighteen short interviews were conducted across three days of the conference, before and after the conference sessions and during breaks. Please see Appendix A for the interview guide. The purpose of the interview was explained to potential participants and verbal consent was obtained from each participant before commencing the interview. Key themes from responses were recorded with pen and paper by the interviewer (Dr Wan Yi Lee). Interview notes were entered manually to an Excel spreadsheet file for thematic analysis.

Informal **observations** and note-taking were undertaken throughout AES22 to capture aspects that may help understand findings.

The **online survey** was adapted from AES19 and refined in consultation with the conference evaluation coordinator, Dr Emily Saurman. Please see Appendix B for the survey questions.

The survey was tested and launched on 4 September 2022 after the conference via the online tool, Survey Monkey. The survey was closed on 22 September 2022.

Data analysis

Data were analysed separately then combined as per the convergent design using a combination of First/Second Cycle coding and sorting techniques (Miles et al., 2014). Quantitative survey data were analysed using automated charts from Survey Monkey and re-worked in Excel. Qualitative data (survey/interview) were analysed using various colour coding techniques in Excel to aid data display and synthesis.

Data synthesis

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 & Spencer, 2002) was applied for its affordances of abstraction and synthesis. This enabled an efficient yet rigorous approach to consolidate ideas and report on findings, whilst embedding an audit trail to enhance validity and reliability. Sub-themes were identified and presented in the findings section based on perceived importance to answering the KEQs irrespective of the number of responses coded under each sub-theme.

Report and support use

The report was provided to AES stakeholders predominantly to inform the AES23 committee as planning is already underway. A presentation to the Board was held on 12 November 2022 to share high-level findings and facilitate post-conference discussion and reflection.

Ethical considerations and limitations

The Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations (AES, 2013a) and the Code of Ethics (AES, 2013b) were consulted during project planning and throughout execution to ensure practice conformed with proper conduct and fairness and adhered to the *propriety* standards (JCSEE, 2014). Issues such as informed consent, data collection and access, confidentiality, privacy, acknowledgement of contributors, and cultural competence were respectfully considered.

One possible limitation of the evaluation is that neither the survey nor the interview sample can be considered representative. Therefore, results cannot be generalised to the entire population of conference delegates. Another possible limitation is that responder bias may be inherent in respondents' self-evaluation of their level of evaluation expertise.

At a Glance - 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 1100. The conference was attended by approximately 544 delegates, 272 of whom responded to the post-conference survey, a response rate of 50%; 18 delegates participated in interviews (VIC 5; NSW 2; SA 2; ACT 3; QLD 1; NT 1; WA 1; International 3) (1% Indigenous).

Age: Under 30 8% |30-49 59% | 50-69 30% |70 and above 3% (n^2 = 266)
Gender: Female 76% | Male 21% |Non-binary/third gender 1% |Prefer not to answer 2% (n = 268)
Indigenous: Yes 15% | No 84% | Prefer not to answer 1% (n = 269)
Number of conferences attended: first conference 58% | 2-3 19% | 4-5 12% |6-10 5.5% |10+ 5.5% (n=271)
AES Member: Yes 72% |No, but considering 20% |Not interested 7% |Other 1% (n = 271)

Where – place of residence / work sector?

Where from: Australia - VIC 30%, NSW 22%, SA 12%, QLD 10%, ACT 9%, NT 4%, WA 3%, TAS 2% |New Zealand 5% |Other International (New Caledonia, Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, USA) 3% (n = 269)

Sector: Community or not-for-profit 27% |Private/consultancy 22% |University 13% |Govt. – 32% |Other 6% (n = 272)

What – experience?

Main involvement: Designing or conducting evaluations 68% |Commissioning or contracting out evaluation projects 9% |Contributing data or information to evaluations 7% |Running programs or projects that get evaluated by others 6% |Teaching 3% | Studying 3% |Other 4% (n = 272)
Level of expertise in evaluation: No background 2% | Novice 16% | Intermediate 46% |Advanced 29% |Expert 7% (n = 267)

Why – attended?

#1 Acquisition of practical ideas (very important 58%; n = 271)
#2 Connecting with people who have common interests (very important 49%; n = 272)
#3 Acquisition of theory (very important 29%; n = 266)
Capacity attended: Participant 88% |Presenter 34% | Exhibitor 4% |Organizer 1% |Other 4% (n=272)

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[2] n refers to number of respondents
*Source of images: 2018 AES conference evaluation report (Mackay, 2018)

Evaluation Findings

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

passionate
welcoming enlightened positively
hopeful **inspired** happy
good engaged
content **curious** community
relaxed much buzzy moving
energised **excited** elated
new **overwhelmed** lovely
uplifted exhausted stimulated
saturated
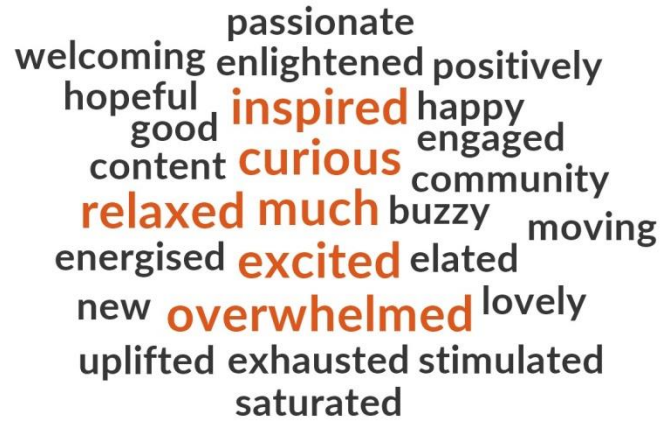
Figure 2. How respondents were feeling at the conference.

The word cloud above shows interviewees' responses to the question 'What is one word to describe how you're feeling right now?' (Figure 2).

Perceptions of Value – KEQ 1

There was enormous support from survey respondents following participation in AES22 with **90%** expressing the conference was **valuable** [Survey Question (SQ) 3]. Reflecting upon leaving the conference, participants reported feeling [SQ4]:

• **INSPIRED 74%** (strongly agree or agree) (n=267)

• **INFORMED 86%** (strongly agree or agree) (n=269)

• **Professionally SATISFIED 79%** (strongly agree or agree) (n=268)

• Part of a **professional COMMUNITY 77%** (strongly agree or agree) (n=266)

Composition of sessions

AES22 was designed with a strong focus on interactivity, skill building and participation. On average, participants reported the proportion of sessions for each format and broad focus area was 'about right' [SQ6] (Figure 3). Participants did however indicate a preference for **more skill building and methodology sessions** (66%). Other aspects participants would like to have more of include interactive sessions (41%), presentations on evaluation theory (41%), presentations on evaluation capacity building (37%) and presentations by Indigenous evaluators (28%). Conversely, participants would like to have less of panel discussions (22%), ignite sessions (16%) and presentations by government evaluators or commissioners (16%). There was a similar preference pattern when analysing the sessions by delegate experience and non-membership status.
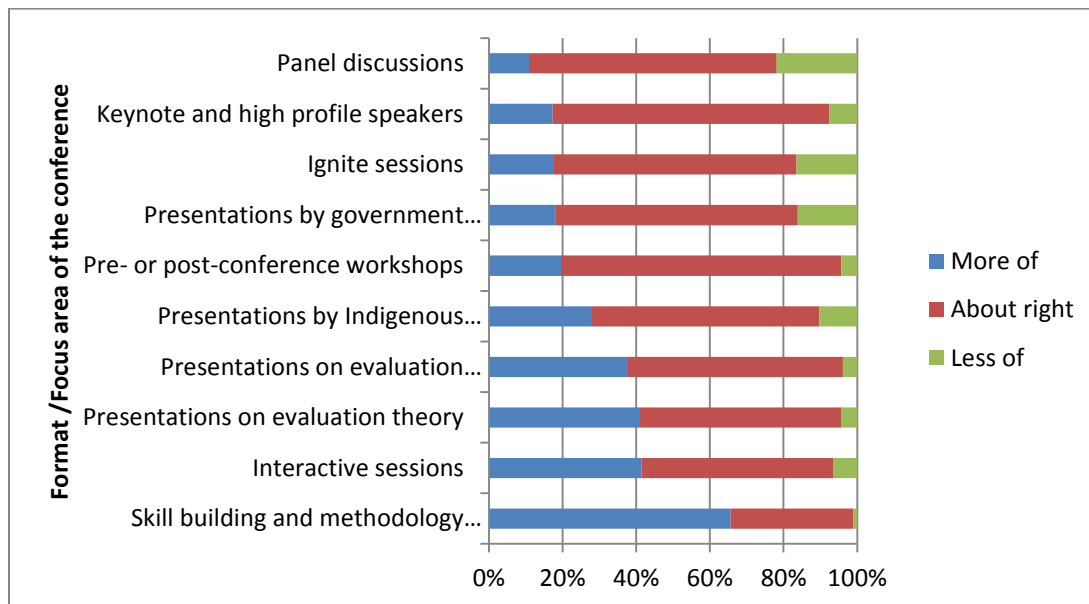

Figure 3. Conference elements of which respondents wanted either more or less.

Participants expressed that there were too many great concurrent sessions and it was difficult to decide which session to attend (Interview 2, 4, 8, 9 & 14). Interviewees suggested hybrid delivery (face-to-face and online) so that they could watch any missed sessions later.

Satisfaction with presentations

Strong satisfaction was noted across the key aspects of the presentations[SQ9] (Figure 4), yet slightly lower satisfaction compared to AES19. **Keynotes** received the **highest satisfaction levels** with 87% of respondents either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' (92% AES 19), followed by 86% 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with quality of presentations (88% AES 19), 83% 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with breadth of presentations (89% AES 19) and 82% 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with length of presentations (89% AES 19).
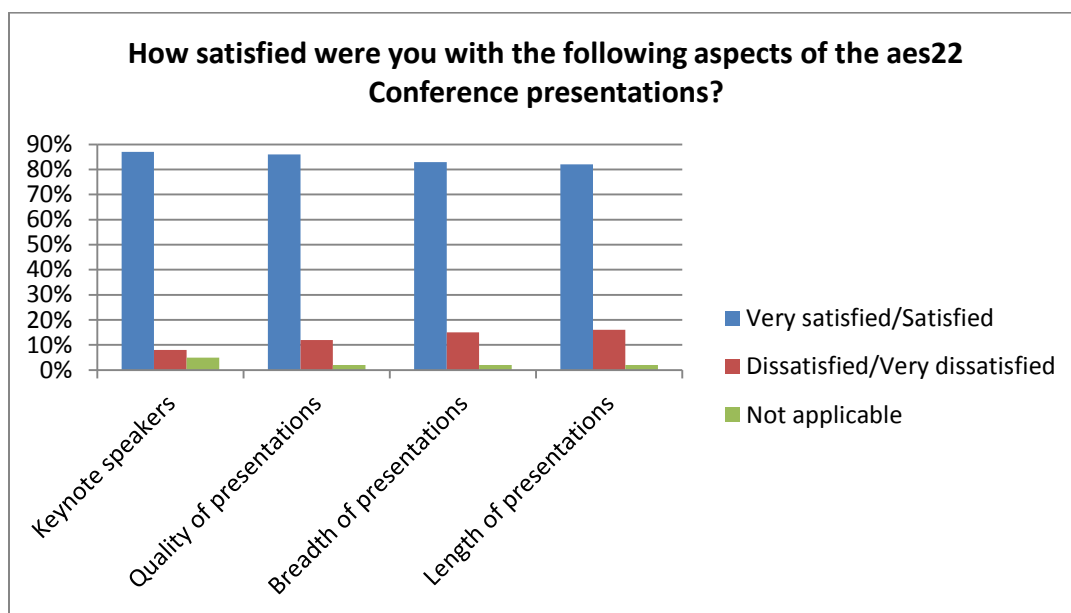
Figure 4. Respondents' perceptions of satisfaction with conference presentations.

Many of the 102 comments [SQ9] offered constructive feedback relating to the length, breadth and quality of presentations (for length and breadth 15% of respondents were either dissatisfied /very dissatisfied, and 12% for quality).

Illustrative comments which capture common themes include:

> **Length |** *"Sometimes very short presentations should have been longer, and other long presentations should have been shorter."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

> **Breadth |** *"I think the diversity and inclusion scope is very narrow. Even with the equity lens I feel that this really only opened up the door for First Nation and Indigenous.*

Accessible, gender, multicultural, LGBTQ needs a much higher representation."
[Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences attended]

Quality | *"There was a wide range in quality of presentations and maybe more guidance should be given so that presenters have a clearer idea of what they are actually intending for us to gain from their presentation."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference]

Feedback was received on specific keynote sessions:

Day 1 Keynote: *Evaluation in pursuit of Indigenous health equity. Weaving courage, evidence and evaluative insights in a funder-commissioned evaluation*

"I left feeling determined to decolonise my evaluation work further. as Nan said a deliberate and intentional equity stance every time for every evaluation. Public craft as stewards of the public good." [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

Day 2 Keynote: *Public health challenges and evaluative thinking: rapid responses in the time of COVID-19*

"My workspace is currently working in agile methodology. It was great to see a keynote topic on how evaluation can be applied in a Lean Start-Up model." [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', AES member, first conference]

Day 3 Keynote: *Soul and maturity: on being evaluators*

"The most inspiring presentation was Amy Gullickson - it made me think about the role of the evaluator, particularly in large system changes." [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]

Among the three **keynote sessions**, Amy Gullickson's keynote presentation received the most positive comments. There were some respondents who commented that the keynotes lacked new ideas, and did not make them "feel challenged to think differently about something, hear about different sides of a debate, or particularly inspired." [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

Overall, feedback for the **panel sessions** was that the sessions were generally too long, especially in the late afternoon. Respondents reported that panel discussions worked well when well-facilitated. Time management within panel sessions such as having appropriate duration for introduction, specifics, Q & A and for each speaker were some constructive feedback.

There were mixed responses to the **Ignite sessions**, some participants considered the Ignite sessions too short to be meaningful, whereas others have enjoyed the sessions for its 'short and sharp' messages. Nonetheless, there was a suggestion to help improve the quality of the Ignite sessions:

Ignite | *"Next year I suggest allocating the Ignite chair a month in advance, then asking the chair to contact participants in advance with some reminders about format and expectations/coaching points. Either that, or ask all Ignite presenters to pre-present one week beforehand at an Ignite rehearsal session where (compulsory or strongly encouraged) people spend 30 minutes at a lunchtime rehearsing their presentation. Don't lose Ignites, they are awesome, they enable a LOT of people to come to the conference. They are a space for what would otherwise be overcooked longer presentations. Some things are awesome in 5 minutes. But the quality needs addressing."* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]

Value for money

Eighty-four percent of respondents reported value for money [SQ7] . Eight of the 90 comments indicated that their employer paid for their registration, travel and accommodation. A number of self-funded attendees, including independent consultants, students, not-for-profit employees and people who travelled to the conference did refer to the cost suggesting it was becoming prohibitive. Three comments suggested that the Gala Dinner could be changed to 'add-on' to reduce the cost.

Schedule & Venue | *"The schedule was too packed and the venue was too packed to allow time and space for networking, which is the main thing I wanted to do - it would have been better to spread out the schedule over a longer period and hire a larger venue, even if that resulted in a higher cost."* [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', non-member, first conference]

Content | *"I felt I got value, but at the same time, the cost is fairly high and given I didn't find I got enough 'new'/inspired content from it I probably wouldn't attend every year given the cost (that I pay myself, as I'm self-employed). So it's too much for a primarily networking opportunity – but if I also got more knowledge and practical things from it then it would be value for money"* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

Expertise level | *"It's not 'what type of presenter/presentation… that matters - it's the quality of the material, and how well it's badged as 'beginner, intermediate, advanced'. I didn't see anything much that was new or advanced."* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]

Grants for emerging Indigenous evaluators | *"While it is expensive, I understand the costs associated with running an event like this. We were also especially grateful to have AES paying for one of our Indigenous evaluation staff to attend - this is much appreciated."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences attended]

Gala dinner | *"The cost of the dinner was about $200 (as this is what an extra ticket costs), which represents a large amount of money (especially if you don't/ didn't drink the alcohol). Given that the music was played so loud at most points that talking was difficult and the speeches/ awards went for so long, this left little time to socialise, which is assumed to be the point of this part of the conference."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference]

Advancement of Strategic Objectives – KEQ 2

Indigenous Culture and Diversity – Indigenous and non-Indigenous capacity in culturally safe evaluation theory, practice and use

This section of the report focuses on perspectives shared by survey and interview respondents relating to Indigenous culture and diversity focused elements of AES22.

> *"Thanks for a great conference and well done to AES for supporting First Nations and emerging evaluators to lead the way and ensure important conversations are had about the future of evaluation and data sovereignty."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', non-member, 2-3 conferences attended, non-Indigenous participant]

Indigenous People

> *"Not only part of a professional community, but part of a community of First Nations people involved in evaluation work."* [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', non-member, first conference, Indigenous presenter and grant recipient]

To better understand the involvement of Indigenous people in the conference, a question was introduced into the survey protocol to identify participants' Indigeneity. The survey data showed a 5% increase delegates who identified as Indigenous in the AES22 conference compared to the last face-to-face conference in 2019 (15% aes22, 10% aes19). Language used for this question was endorsed by an AES Indigenous Board Member in pre-conference scoping sessions. Indigeneity of participants is indicated in this section *(Indigenous Culture and Diversity)* when reporting direct quotes to ensure Indigenous voices are included and to better understand Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives within the AES community.

Reflections

Intentions to embed a focus on strengthening Indigenous culture and diversity within the conference program and broad 'Weaving evaluation into the whole' theme were clearly visible. Sixty-eight percent of respondents strongly agree/agree that the conference theme stimulated discussion and engagement, 56% strongly agree/agree that the conference theme helped to focus presentations, 52% strongly agree/agree that the conference theme inspired new thinking and 69% strongly agree/agree that the conference theme reflected the interests of the profession[SQ10] (Figure 5).

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements: The conference theme 'Weaving evaluation into the whole' …
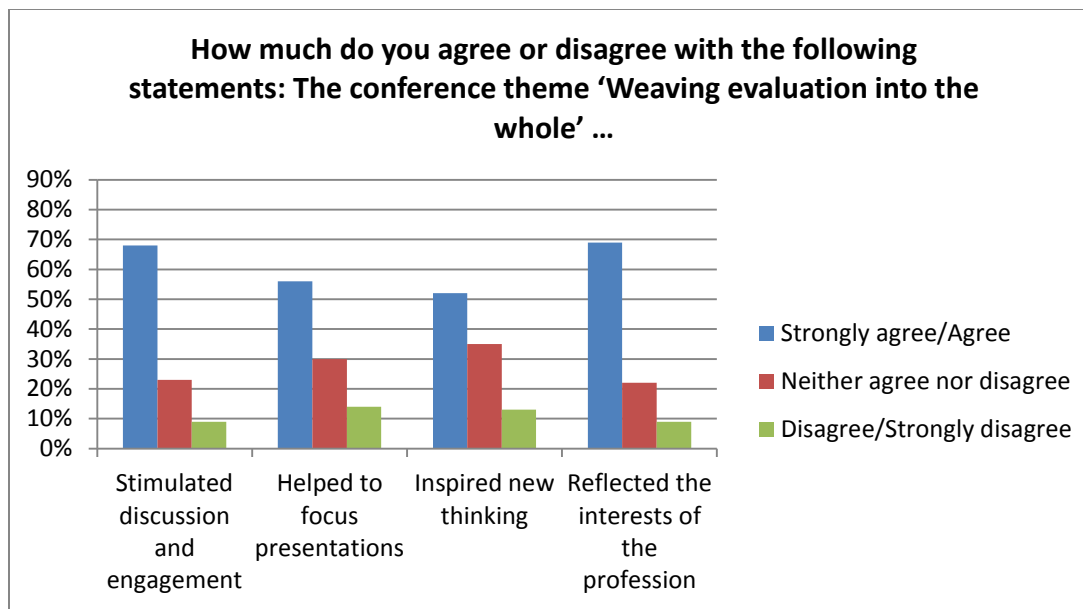
Figure 5. Participant perception of conference theme.

There were mixed comments on the usefulness of the theme or a conference theme in general, and there were feedback on the implications of the aes22 theme:

Selecting sessions| *"Every title had the word weaving in it which made it extra hard to work out what the presentation was going to be on and therefore would it be of interest to me and my organisation."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference, non-Indigenous participant]

Presentation title and content | *"What I saw was it made lots of space for Indigenous methodologies to be integrated and promoted. There were however, presentations that included the word weaving into their title, but didn't reflect the concept of weaving into their presentation."* [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', non-member, first conference, Indigenous presenter and grant recipient]

Building culture of evaluation | *"I think the concept of 'weaving' was good, and one presenter used the analogy of warp and weft, i.e. in evaluation there is a need to use tension gently interwoven with softness and some slack to create change. This rang true for me in engaging my organisation to build a culture of evaluation which requires frank and open discussion and a sensitivity to acknowledge people's emotional needs."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', non-member, first conference, non-Indigenous participant]

Gap in the program | "*The theme made it quite difficult to bring forward purely methodological and analytical papers, it was a gap in the programming where I was hoping to see more*" [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences attended, non-Indigenous participant]

> **Unifying theme |** *"AES should consider giving up on those unifying themes and original strands that change each conference. They are unnecessarily confusing. Having at least a few standard strands across conferences (like evaluation theory, methodology, Indigenous evaluation, etc.) would help build incremental discussions over time and help people figure out where to submit their presentation application. Ultimately the nature of the debate doesn't have to change every year to be relevant. Having an inspiring new theme every time artificially forces people to tweak their messages so it fits the theme."*
> [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences attended, non-Indigenous presenter and exhibitor]

Keynote

Several respondents reflected on their learning from the Keynote on Indigenous evaluation – *Evaluation in pursuit of Indigenous health equity. Weaving courage, evidence and evaluative insights in a funder-commissioned evaluation*:

> **Relevance |** *"I felt that the theme was actually very dated. I didn't hear any First Nations people calling for weaving of knowledge. The metaphor is passed ... First Nations people are beyond that and want separate resources to restore their own communities and knowledge ... recall Nan's guidance in her address >>> move out of the way"* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences, Non-Indigenous participant]

> **Non-Indigenous evaluator's role|** *"I did not like to be made to feel ashamed of working with Indigenous communities, for we work hard to increase capacity and to work in partnership. I do understand the desire and good will of supporting Indigenous evaluators however does the AES also support emerging non-indigenous evaluators?"* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference, Non-Indigenous participant]

> **Equity |** *"Look this was an amazing effort. Think that some more discussion could be beneficial to see what could be progressed in conference on the Equity agenda as raised by Nan - this is super important to all of us."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference, Non-Indigenous participant]

These notations illustrate the current development of Indigenous and non-Indigenous capacity in culturally safe evaluation theory, practice and use, a complex and constantly evolving space, where work relationships and roles would need to gradually change to promote Indigenous capacity for self-determination.

Presentations

Overall, feedback was positive about cultural safety and the emphasis on Indigenous participation at the conference.

A number of Indigenous and non-Indigenous delegates and presenters with varying involvement in evaluation reflected on Indigenous presentations at the conference:

Language | *"It was frankly embarrassing listening to presenter after presenter, some speaking of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs use this term [intervention], ignoring the very real negative connotations of this term for many, particularly when AES had gone to the effort of inviting and subsidising Indigenous evaluators."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference, Non-Indigenous participant]

Power positioning| *"Many of the spaces I entered presenters did not adequately reflect on power or power positioning within evaluation or alternative methodologies in evaluation that can be really beneficial. Little to no mentions of the importance of data sovereignty and governance. Presenters were also presenting First Nations evaluation without any of them present which was alarming. Please make any presenters presenting on First Nations peoples or their knowledges be accompanied by the people they are presenting on."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', non-member, first conference, Indigenous participant]

Perspectives from lived experience | *"Listening to first nations evaluators really opened my eyes to doing evaluation from a position of lived experience in a way that has the potential to challenge the existing power imbalances between evaluant (or whatever that fancy word is) and the evaluator."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference, Non-Indigenous participant]

Indigenous service provider | *"Love the opportunity for me and to present what I do in New Zealand as a service provider where I work with troubled youth through an Indigenous lens apply my Indigenous methods to the teachings. I am Maori and found when I presented that the room was really engaged in my korero (talk) and wanted to know more about how this had an effect on the youth I was working with"* [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', non-member, first conference, Indigenous participant]

Pathways – Clear professional and career pathways

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 enhance evaluation knowledge and expertise, and continuously improve the quality of evaluation practice in Australasia.

> *"It was so comforting and empowering to see that there are others in a similar space to me and my organisation, facing the same challenges and how they are overcoming it."* [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', non-member, first conference]

> *"Not enough advanced material/leading edge material to keep 'old hands' learning."* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]

Theoretical Foundations, Research Methods and Systematic Inquiry

There were more than 35 comments across multiple survey questions [SQ 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 14 & 15] that related to aspects of methods, and more than 28 comments [SQ 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 14 & 15] that related to aspects of theory. There were more than 15 comments [SQ 3, 7, 9, 14 & 15] that related to practical ideas. Themes relayed from survey respondents are captured in these quotes:

> **Foundations |** *"I am concerned for people who work in an 'evaluation' job without training in evaluation theory, methodology, or social research... The conference could be an opportunity for these people to discover that there is a body of knowledge and practice in the evaluation field that could enable them to be more effective in their work."* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 6-10 conferences attended]

> **Impact evaluation |** *"I was surprised at the near-complete absence of counterfactual-based impact evaluations from the conference program. I recognise that there is more to evaluation than just that but felt it was a strange gap that there was so little about that broad sub-field."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', non-member, first conference]

> **Technical methods |** *"The conference was valuable … excepting for the availability of presentations regarding more technical methods. A workshop on Systems Evaluation Theory (Ralph Renger), Value for Investment (Julian King), Rubrics guided evaluation (Jane Davidson) and Developing evaluative criteria (Matthea Roorda & Amy Gullickson), would have added tremendous value for me"* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

> **Practical examples |** *"I would have liked the presenters to share more practical examples of how they did things so I could see more clearly how I could incorporate their ideas in my own role. For example in the storytelling panel, I wanted to know how they did the storytelling and examples of how it led to better outcomes. Or concrete examples of how they changed their work to foreground First Nations voices or be truly community led. I'm so on board for these ideas, but it can be hard to understand how they actually*

did them in practice. These ideas can seem daunting, but if I had some examples of when it worked, it would help me make my organisation better at self-determination."
[Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', non-member, first conference]

Presentation elements | *"Talks that presented the detail of the program and then followed up the evaluation were good because it gave life and connectedness. e.g., financial literacy in Indigenous communities talk. It had all the elements, presented the program, talked about the theory, talked about the challenges and the results."*
[Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference]

Program and participation

A couple of comments suggested that the aes22 conference focus and participation group contributed to an unbalanced program:

Focus | "*The AES conferences currently have a large focus on the qualitative/ design/commissioning side of evaluations, and not much on the quantitative/data side. For those who work in quantitative roles it feels that many of the sessions are not particularly relevant. There also seems to be a much bigger focus on the community services/not-for-profit sector, and not so much for those in the public sector. The conference also seems to have a 'big picture/blue sky' type focus which I think limits the practical takeaways. It would be nice to have some more representation for people who are actually conducting the evaluations themselves (i.e., analysing data etc.) rather than just commissioning/coordinating."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

Participation | "*Over time, the participation of AES has seemed very narrow. There is not a lot about experimental design. There is not a lot about statistical analysis. There is not a lot from sectors that are not social sectors. It is the same topics covered year in and year out. But, broadening participation would require a lot of engagement with sectors who do not normally engage with AES."* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', non-member, 4-5 conferences attended]

These comments indicated the importance of engagement between different sectors, which will be further discussed in the section on the final strategic priority, *Relationships – Collaboration and partnerships to strengthen the field of evaluation.*

Overall, common themes noted the need for more:

- quantitative evaluation presentations
- foundational knowledge and discussion about evaluation as a profession for emerging evaluators
- sessions for advanced evaluators
- technical methods sessions
- sessions with practical examples

- guidance (e.g., framework) for presenters to prepare their content for the intended audience
- engagement with multiple sectors.

Vitality – An organization meeting diverse member needs today and tomorrow

Understanding the value proposition of membership is a key area of the *Vitality* strand of the Society's strategic priorities. Most respondents were members (72% - individual membership 56%; organisational membership 16%), with 20% of respondents considering to join the Society (n = 271).

> *"The people made it valuable - but the conference program was unbalanced and did not reflect the expertise of the membership or include key issues that governments look to from evaluators."* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]

Current and emerging issues

'Gaining a better understanding of members' needs and the issues they and the communities they serve face' (p. 19) is one of the outcomes for the *Vitality* strategic priority (AES, 2022).

Comments from the interviews and survey data revealed several issues concerning AES members:

> **Technology |** *"Technology in evaluation. Technological tool to ease work, ease process of evaluation. That's the future of all work."* [Interview participant]

> **Culture and diversity |** *"I know AES has done a lot to try to engage with non-Western researchers, but it has not gone far enough."* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', non-member, 4-5 conferences attended]

> **Connection with previous work |** *"There was often a lack of connection with previous work in recent decades - ideas being put up as new which have been done in other places and contexts. It would have been good to have the connections explicit e.g. storytelling, narratives, community development, qualitative evaluation."* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]

> **Theoretical innovation |** *"My opinion is that there has been very little interesting theoretical or practical innovation in evaluation since the 70s, with some small pockets of interesting work since then. I would say the field is in a crisis. AES should be at the forefront of dealing with this but it seems to be happy to just continue along with very little change."* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', non-member, 4-5 conferences attended]

> **New tools for new environment |** *"While many of the topics were interesting and indicated new approaches, much of the actual content has been covered in previous AES conferences and session durations did not allow for adequate depth to dive into new tools and techniques evaluators could be using to respond to the changing views and environments for undertaking evaluations. Since COVID-19, evaluation and research*

functions have been wrapped up in strategy, design and implementation processes - having more information on how these intertwine and intersect will be beneficial."
[Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

CALD communities | "*Also think there could be more representation for evaluations of programs involving Culturally and Linguistically Diverse [CALD] people."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

Environmental policies | "*Sometimes I think much of the content is not practical/ applicable - seems to be mostly self-congratulatory. Need more focus on environmental policy and programs with climate change being such an important "emerging" issue"* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

LGBTQIA+ community | "*One suggestion for improvement around inclusion would be the addition of pronouns on our conference IDs. This would go a long way to normalise the communication of pronouns and to signify a welcoming environment for gender diverse people but also the broader LGBTQIA+ community."* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', non-member, first conference]

In summary, responses indicated the need for improving diversity and inclusion in terms of content as well as participation. It is also important to acknowledge connection between new and old content, as well as bring in innovative ideas and technology relevant to current and evolving contexts.

International participation

Most respondents (92%) travelled from within Australia to the conference. Eight percent of the respondents were international delegates mainly from New Zealand and South Pacific countries.

Several comments revealed participants' wish to see more international representation and content at the conference [SQ7 & 15]:

- *"In the future, the conference should have more presentations and sessions on international development."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', non-member, first conference]
- *"It would have been nice to have had a few more international speakers, but COVID-19 has probably influenced this."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference]
- *"I did not get the 'memo' that this was really an Australian domestic focussed conference. In the past AES conference has been more internationally focussed, with plenary speakers from outside our region to promote cross-fertilisation of ideas and to stimulate new thinking. This conference seemed very inward looking, despite being called an 'international' conference."* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences attended]

These findings will help inform the Society's focus on achieving the outcome for the *Vitality* strategic priority – 'Enhancing member services and improving the reach across our geographically diverse membership' (AES, 2022, p. 19)

Key learning from the conference

Respondents reported some evaluation-related concepts and learning at the conference that they intend to incorporate into their own work or workplace [SQ14]. The top 10 being:

> **Developmental evaluation (15 responses) |** *"We've been doing "developmental evaluation" without knowing but this concept has now reinforce how we structure and evolves this in practice within our program and see if we can also elevate this to a 'small pilot initiative' together with our implementing partners in Vanuatu."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference]

> **Equity (11 responses) |** *"My evaluations will have a strengthened equity focus."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', non-member, first conference]

> **Impact evaluation (10 responses) |** *"Social impact evaluation tools - and the complexity of this knowledge area."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', non-member, first conference]

> **Indigenous data sovereignty (9 responses) |** *"Indigenous Data Sovereignty - the workshop I attended was so useful in understanding how evaluation processes can ensure that data ownership remains with communities."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences attended]

> **Theory (7 responses) |** *"Developing program theory"* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]

> **Place-based evaluation (6 responses) |** *"Learnings from the Place based MEL workshop"* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', non-member, first conference]

> **Rapid evaluation (6 responses) |** *"Rapid proto-typing" "rapid evaluation cycles"* [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', non-member, first conference]

> **Change (4 responses) |** *"Storytelling for systems change at community level, insights from the field. Outcomes cannot change if systems need change or reform. Community led work-engage the beneficiaries to be in the driving seat, balance of power: preparations and readiness towards systemic change and reform. Framing storytelling to tell stories on how different power dynamics, relationships can be contributing "as enabler" or as "blockers" to inform systemic change or reform."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference]

> **Design (4 responses) |** *"Evidence based co-design"* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences attended]

Environmental (4 responses) | *"Managing evaluation's environmental footprint (Patricia Rogers' session)"* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences attended]

Relationships – Collaboration and partnerships to strengthen the field of evaluation

> *"Lots of food for thought, lots of strong messaging, lots of friendship and support amongst the evaluation community of our practice and roles"* [Participant/Presenter: University, role in evaluation - Designing or conducting evaluations]

Forming various strategic relationships in order to promote evaluation 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 6. The sector most represented was Government with 32% (State or Local 17% and Federal 15%), followed by Community or not-for-profit (NFP) 27%, and Private sector/consultancy 22%. Notably, there is an 8% increase in respondents working in community or not-for-profit and a 9% decrease in respondents working in State or Territory Government compared to 2019 data. 'Designing or conducting evaluations' continues to be the main way delegates identify being engaged in evaluation (68%), followed by 'Commissioning or contracting-out evaluation projects' (9%).
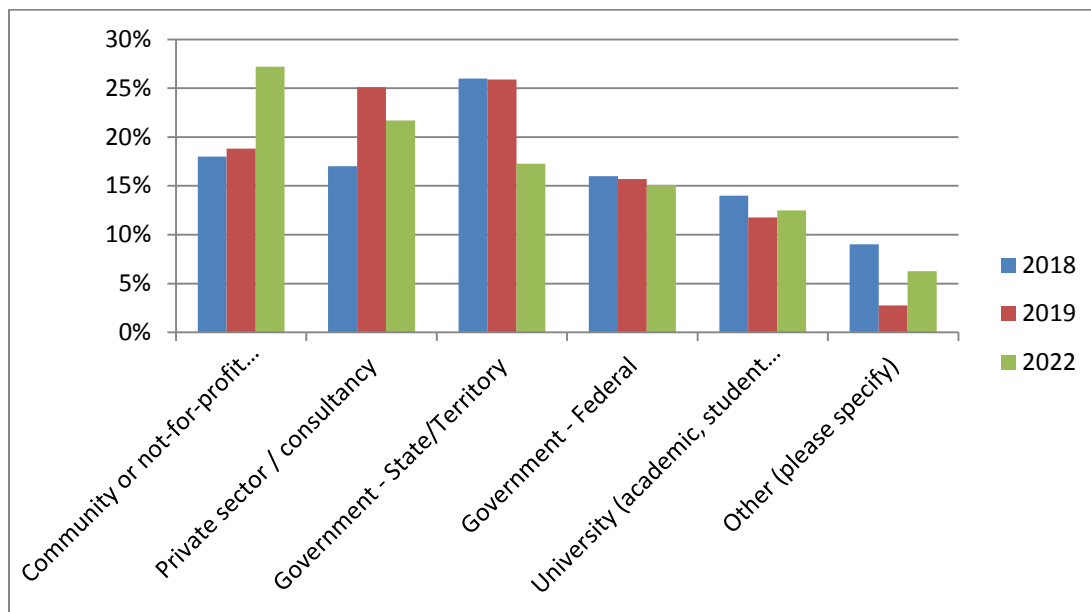

Figure 6. Work sector of survey respondents

Attendance at AES22 was similar to previous years (Figure 7) with most survey respondents attending for the first time (58%)[SQ23]. There were 16% more first-timers at AES22 (58%) compared to AES19 (42%).

How many AES conferences have you attended?
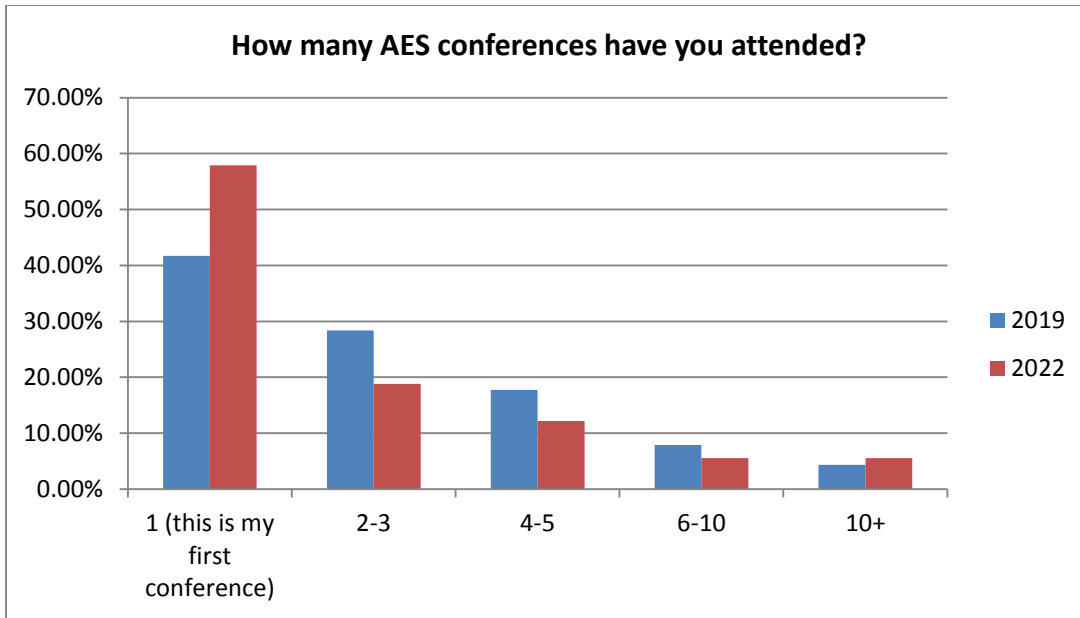
Figure 7. Number of AES conferences attended.

Networking

References to networking were a common theme throughout the interviews and survey. Ninety three percent of respondents made connections at the conference [SQ11]. Breaks between sessions (82%) were the most popular occasions where delegates made professional connections, followed by Gala Awards Dinner (48%) and pre-conference workshops (31%)[SQ12](Figure 8).

Where did you make connections at the conference?
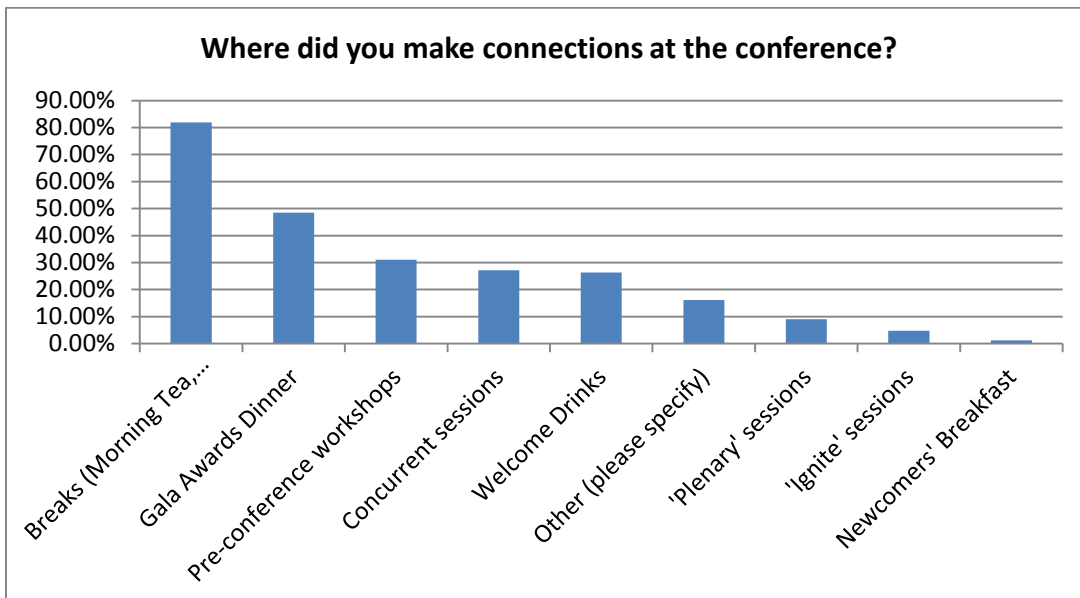
Figure 8. Occasions where delegates made professional connections at the conference.

Respondents also reported other occasions/places for networking including after their presentation, First Nations Space, interactive sessions, at exhibition booths, follow up email to presenters, on the Indigenous walk, at a dinner outside the conference, ACT chapter pre-conference networking, before plenary, direct message via Sched app, interactive sessions, staying in the same hotel, SA local lunchtime meeting, Special Interest Group session, talking with presenter/delegate after the session, Kowa Collaboration Space, and while chairing a session.

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., grant recipients, newcomers). Some comments are noted below and will be further elaborated on in the section on ***Future Conference Ideas***.

Newcomers and grant recipients

- *"An event to bring the Indigenous evaluator grant winners together at the beginning of the Conference so that they can support each other."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences attended]
- *"Perhaps could assign a buddy to newcomers, someone experienced in conferences and the field."* [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', AES member, first conference]

Fields and sectors

- *"Perhaps having the opportunity in a lunch break on one day to gather by area/workplace - such as …environment/social/health/training and education/ program evaluators as a way to network with like fields. And this would enable support or collaboration on projects between those in the same field who are possibly looking at same issues or who have more or different experience that could assist"* [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', non-member, first conference]
- *"Sessions aimed at discussion and getting people out of siloes (e.g., all government people with government people)."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', non-member, first conference]

Communication and promotion of events

- *"Having the lunch time gatherings for whole states or committees seemed like a good idea, I didn't really know they were happening until end of lunch on day 3."* [Participant: self-reported 'Novice evaluator', non-member, first conference]
- *"I didn't know about the newcomers breakfast - would have attended! Maybe a little more info on the social/networking rhythm or plans pre-conference."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference]
- *"Ensure the social program information is easily accessible and promoted"* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

Off-site events

- *"I also liked the cultural walking tour, could do more outdoor activities to connect people - it's always nice to get outside during long days in a conference"* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference]
- *"An event at a local famous venue would be great for interstate visitors. I visited the National wine centre and thought it would have been great to have an AES drinks there."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference]

Timing of events

- *"As the traditional pre-Conference drinks weren't being held on the Monday night, the Canberra Region hosted an informal get-together which was very well attended - with Conference drinks then being held after the AGM."* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]
- *"Make the welcome drinks event inviting for all (post-AGM narrows the audience). Consider alternative timing."* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

Technology

- *"I think encourage members to use Sched to organise spontaneous sessions at the conference during lunch times"* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]
- "*Perhaps including some key words in profiles that would help search for other participants with common interest."* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]

Gala Dinner

- "*Less speeches at the Gala dinner, and have them spread across the plenary sessions instead."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 2-3 conferences attended]
- *"Only concern is that the social events (particularly the conference dinner) represented a fairly high COVID-19 risk... but it was enjoyable. I know a lot of conferences are skipping the dinner now-a-days. This will be something for the AES-23 committee to think about."* [Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 6-10 conferences attended]

Overall, the feedback indicated the need to improve quality of networking sessions considering the areas listed above instead of having more time than already allocated.

Conference organization

Overall, respondents were satisfied with the organization of the conference[SQ8](Figure 9). There were a number of feedback about the conference digital application 'Sched' and Gala Awards Dinner, which will be further elaborated on in the section on **Future Conference Ideas**.
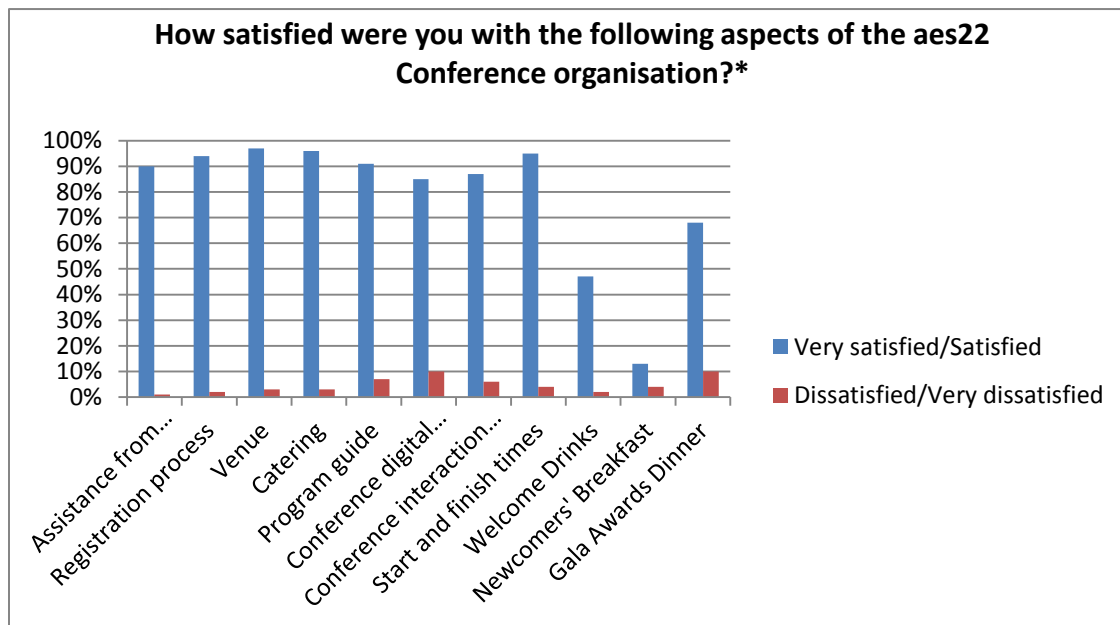
Figure 9. Survey respondents' level of satisfaction with the aes conference organization aspects.* % do not equal 100% because some answered not applicable.

Sector engagement

The importance of engagement with government, NGOs, corporate providers, education institutions and other bodies involved in evaluation is a key focus of the AES moving forward. This was reiterated at the conference by the strong presence of keynote speakers, panel sessions, presenters and participants from a range of sectors.

The broad range of presentations was well received, demonstrating positive promotion of the use of evaluation and evaluative thinking across sectors. Several comments below illustrate participants' reflection on the sessions:

> **Influencing systemic change |** *"This is my first time to attend and also present a case study on how Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning is weaved and support systemic reform within Vanuatu Skills Partnership. I found it quite resonating with the key principles and good practice of our MEL work in this program in Vanuatu - not only influencing systemic change within but across with our Government monitoring, learning and reporting systems (where there is appetite for change and reform)"*
> [Participant/Presenter: Bilateral Government Initiative, role in evaluation - Designing or conducting evaluations]

Cross-sector learning | "*Being from the Environmental sector there are less subject specific presentations, however it is good to hear what is happening in other sectors and how that could then be applied*" [Participant: Government - State/Territory, role in evaluation - Designing or conducting evaluations]

Building capacity | "*It was inspiring to hear from other government departments grappling with building evaluation capacity in their respective departments.*" [Participant: Government - State/Territory, role in evaluation - Designing or conducting evaluations]

Non-government organizations (NGOs) | "*Need more from NGOs! more longer, in depth presentations, less presentations overall, way more interactive presentations needed*" [Participant: Community or not-for-profit sector, role in evaluation - Designing or conducting evaluations]

Fair voice | "*It would be good if the aes22 conference committee and organizers to also consider getting the "fair voice representation" of the Indigenous speakers whether "MEL [monitoring, evaluation and learning]" is implemented at an Aboriginal community or society and also across the Asia/Pacific regions (for more of Indigenous voice together with the MEL experts) be heard in such important forums/conferences.*" [Participant/Presenter: Bilateral Government Initiative, role in evaluation - Designing or conducting evaluations]

Scientific expertise | "*Bringing scientists and experts could help challenge and balance the trends, fads, consultancy-oriented content found in many presentations. Bring experts that can discuss the actual effectiveness of a given type of program in a given sector, for example.*" [Participant/Presenter: University, role in evaluation - Teaching evaluation]

Engaging decision makers | "*I wonder how we can engage decision makers beyond the profession. These are often the people evaluations and evaluators are trying to influence, but they are not in the room so there is an element of preaching to the choir*" [Presenter: Private sector / consultancy, role in evaluation - Designing or conducting evaluations]

Non-evaluators | "*Please brief the keynotes/panels (especially) do not stand up and apologise for not being an evaluator at an evaluation conference. This happened a lot especially on panels and was a bit confusing. Own your professional identity for what you ARE…if it is the main purpose of the conference.*" [Participant/Presenter: Government - State/Territory, role in evaluation - Designing or conducting evaluations]

The above responses from participants and presenters align with AES's focus, which 'seeks to promote evaluation practice, and in turn, support improved policy delivery and measurement of outcomes and impact' (AES, 2022, p. 20) through building professional connections and communities of practice across sectors.

AES23 – Brisbane

Forty-nine percent said they planned to attend AES23 in Brisbane (n=134), and 47% stated they were 'unsure' (n=127)$_{[SQ25]}$:

- *"Thanks for a great conference. I've recommended to others involved in evaluation to attend next year's conference. One of the best parts was finding out how generous and welcoming folks at the conference were."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, first conference]

- *"Fantastic conference, well organised, lots of fun and connecting. So glad I went. Can't wait for Brisbane next year."* [Participant: self-reported 'Intermediate evaluator', AES member, 4-5 conferences attended]

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 AES23 and presents some of the creative suggestions, and general feedback from delegates who generously contributed their perspectives and reflections following participation at AES22 in August-September 2022.

Suggestions
Content, format, delivery

- **Plenary:** consider ways to streamline the plenary sessions to make the sessions more energetic and engaging.
- **Keynote session length:** 1.5 hour plenary sessions could be shortened to 1 hour maximum plus 15 minutes for questions.
- **Presentation session length:** 1 hour paper presentations could be shortened to 45 minutes as optimal session length to sustain participants' attention. Conversely, 30-minute sessions could be extended to 45-minue sessions to provide more in-depth presentations.
- **Panel sessions:** consider shortening panel sessions, ensure good timekeeping and facilitation skills.
- **Interactive sessions:** consider extending interactive sessions to 1.5 hours to allow for deep discussions, not just a chat with a small group of other session attendees.
- **Modality:** consider adding TED style talks from evaluators about the difference they make - including some coaching beforehand.
- **Virtual participation:** consider digital attendance for some sessions, e.g., plenaries, keynotes, panels to be more inclusive for participants with disability or care responsibilities, in COVID-19 isolation, and who couldn't afford to travel.
- **Between sessions:** provide gaps (even 5-10 min) between presentations for attendees to move between rooms.
- **Symposium:** consider adding a single day online symposium each year which is free for all members.
- **COVID times:** consider new format for conference during COVID times.

Presenters

- **Guidance:** provide guidance/coaching for presenters to prepare their content for the intended format, session length and audience.
- **Keynotes:** consider having one keynote speaker from outside the evaluation field (but relevant), such as a scientific expert.

- **Speakers:** consider having a few more international , quantitative evaluation and public sector speakers.
- **MC:** encourage emerging evaluators to take on some hosting of the plenary sessions.

Engagement and networking
- **Cross-sector connections:** encourage participants to build network across sectors to promote understanding, knowledge sharing and collaboration opportunities.
- **Diversity:** ensure fair (voice) representation at the conference (e.g., Indigenous, early career/mid-career/advanced evaluators, LGBTQIA+, disabilities) and consider the use of accessible language in the program.
- **Event promotion:** improve promotion/communication of special events such as the whole state lunch time gatherings and Newcomers' Breakfast**.**
- **Newcomers:** consider a buddy program to support first-timers.
- **Grant recipients:** consider setting up a pre-conference event for grant recipients/first-timers to meet and support each other, invite grant recipients to share their views at the Gala Dinner.
- **Networking:** introduce a range of mechanisms/opportunities for optional networking e.g., through an app to schedule meet ups to discuss a particular issue or to socialize.
- **Stalls:** consider book (e.g., new release books mentioned by presenters) stalls, art and community stalls**.**
- **Lanyard IDs:** consider adding pronouns on conference IDs.
- **Indigenous breakfast:** consider including both Australian and international Indigenous participants.
- **Cultural activities:** consider more cultural activity to connect with local Peoples and include (e.g., local Indigenous walking tour) in conference schedule (between 9am-5pm).
- **Gala dinner:** consider improving COVID-19 protocols at the dinner or consider an outdoor event instead, consider earlier start times, acknowledge convenors' work at the dinner.

Program and resources

- **Resources:** disseminate the recording and slides shortly after the conference to better facilitate knowledge transfer/reporting back/capacity building.
- **Slido:** consider using Slido with live questions so that the audience can see who is asking the question and be more inclusive for people who don't use phone technology that much.
- **Sched:** consider offering a tutorial to participants who needed some technical support to use the app and improving clarity of session information (e.g., length of Ignite session, presentation summary).
- **Printed program booklet:** ensure consistency between printed and electronic program schedule (e.g., welcome drinks and gala dinner not found in Sched), consider reviewing

visual layout for ease of reading (e.g., with different sized blocks showing presentations of different lengths), keep the reduced printed version as some participants still prefer it over the app.

- **Sustainability:** consider allowing participants to keep their paper cups for the day to reduce waste.

Organisation and logistics

- **Online registration:** consider streamlining the booking system (e.g., only need to fill in name and details once).
- **Information on venue:** consider conveying information about the venue (e.g., cloakroom availability and room locations) during registration and/or through signage.
- **Lunch seating:** Ensure enough tables and seats and option to sit outdoor to be more COVID-safe.
- **Catering:** ensure all dietary requirements (e.g., gluten-free) are catered for, consider more healthy options (e.g., fruits) and afternoon tea for the final day.
- **Timetabling:** consider distributing presentations so that similar topics are not concurrent, consider some workshops during the conference, not pre or post, consider finish time latest by 5pm each day.
- **Conference rooms:** ensure enough rooms to run sessions (e.g., avoid having to vacate the First Nations creative space for a workshop), ensure rooms are not too crowded.
- **Audio:** consider the sound volume in rooms (e.g., use of microphone).
- **Water jugs and glasses:** ensure venue staff prepare water jugs and glasses for each session (e.g., keynote/panel sessions).
- **Wellbeing space:** consider having a wellbeing space for meditation and stretching to process all of the learning at the conference.
- **Accommodation:** ensure all hotels listed on the conference website are good quality.
- **Closing:** consider a shorter final day as many participants were exhausted by Day 3 as well to enable interstate delegates travel time (e.g., mid-afternoon close on day 3).

General feedback

COVID-19 protocol: *"The conference organisers' messaging around wearing masks was brilliant. Firm but not militant. I felt safe, I returned home well. That was particularly important as I have a family member who has a complex chronic illness and is doing all they can to stay safe. I felt I was 'doing my bit' while also enjoying the socialising with other conference delegates. Thank you."* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]

Atmosphere: *"There was a really nice atmosphere at the aes22; people were friendly, the program was interesting and diverse and the venue facilitated meeting people."* [Participant: self-reported 'Expert evaluator', AES member, 6-10 conferences attended]

> *"Well done to the aes22 team - great event and colleagues of mine who were first time attendees found it to be a very positive experience."*
>
> **[Participant: self-reported 'Advanced evaluator', AES member, 10+ conferences attended]**

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Appendices
Appendix A – Interview Guide
Appendix B – Online Survey

Acknowledgements