

**SIGRID PATTERSON &
CHARLIE TULLOCH**

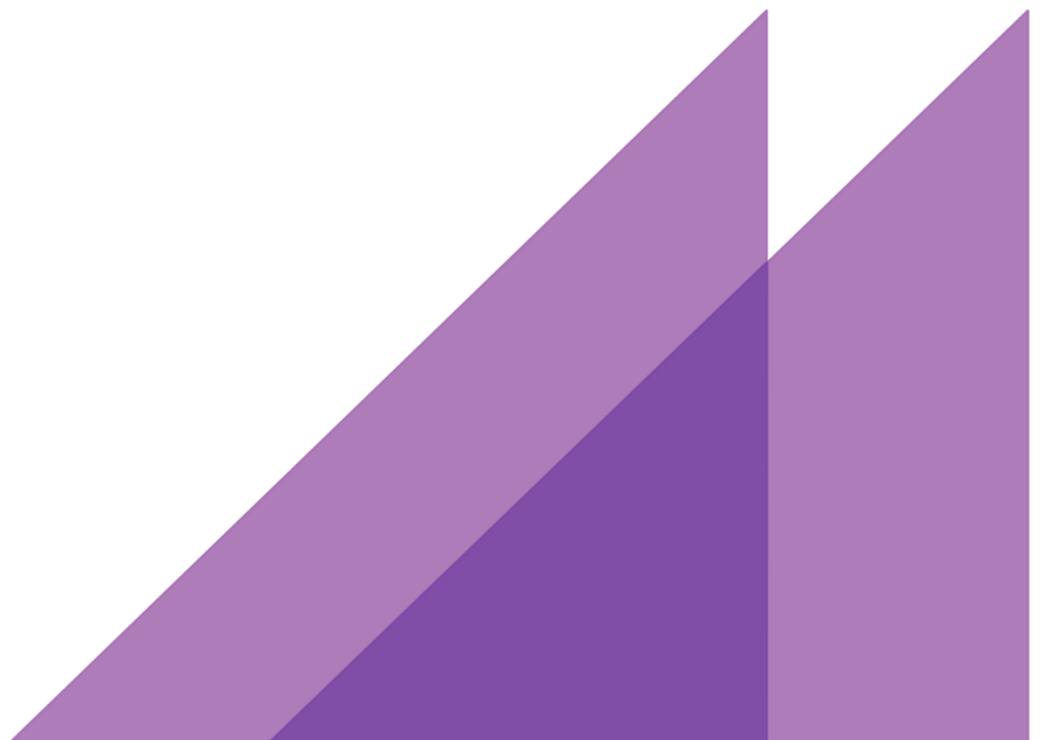
**FINAL REPORT TO
THE AUSTRALASIAN EVALUATION SOCIETY**

FEBRUARY 2015

**EVALUATION OF THE
AES CONFERENCE:
DARWIN 2014**



**EVALUATION OF THE PARTICIPANT
EXPERIENCE, ORGANISATION AND LOGISTICS
AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT**



Executive summary

Evaluation overview

The Darwin 2014 Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) Conference was held between 8 and 12 September 2014 at the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges (ACIKE), located at the Casuarina Campus of Charles Darwin University (CDU). The conference's theme was 'unleashing the power of evaluation'. It featured two days of pre-conference workshops, two and a half days of conference activities, a conference opening event, a social program, international keynote speakers, a broad range of presentations by attendees and a range of other activities.

An evaluation was sought by the AES to assess the value of the conference, along with ways to improve the conference over the next three to five years. AES Board members and key Darwin event organisers helped to shape the focus of the evaluation against three key themes: the participant experience; organisation and logistics; and strategic alignment of the conference with AES' goals.

The evaluation was conducted by two Master of Evaluation students at the University of Melbourne, with support from the Centre for Program Evaluation and the AES, in particular two evaluation 'fellows' who provided expert guidance throughout the process.

The evaluation deliverables include this report on findings and appendices, associated data collection tools that could be used in future years and a separate report for the AES detailing post-event participant and non-participant survey findings.

The findings focus largely on identifying critical challenges and areas for improvement in future.

The participant experience

Overall, the Darwin 2014 conference was considered a success by participants, with improved post-event satisfaction ratings compared to Brisbane 2013, Adelaide 2012 and Sydney 2011. The AES' goals to support evaluation in Indigenous contexts were met, though some participants also desired a greater focus on sessions relevant to their varied fields of work, including international development, health and government.

The majority of attendees were satisfied with the Darwin 2014 venue, citing its relaxed, outdoor environment as a contributor to the overall success of the conference. More broadly, attendees value venues supporting informality, sociability, interaction and inclusiveness.

The main motivations for participants attending Darwin 2014 were to pursue professional learning opportunities, to network with others in the evaluation field and to exchange knowledge. Those AES members who were not able to attend the conference were restricted by the cost of travel to Darwin and inability to take time away from work to attend.

A major challenge raised by participants was the navigation of which sessions to attend based on levels of expertise in the field. It was suggested that the program facilitate categorisation of sessions according to levels of pre-requisite knowledge.

Other challenges raised by participants included:

- the remoteness of the accommodation
- early session start times (difficult for some participants)
- lack of practical or skill-based workshops at the conference
- a large number of concurrent sessions resulted in participants feeling they were missing sessions of interest
- many sessions seemed to be too short in duration, limiting deeper discussion.

While many presentations were well-received, some participant feedback noted variable presentation quality. It was suggested that a presenter's kit be developed to guide practice. In addition, some participants suggested that real-time feedback of all sessions be collected to capture information that is essential to improving future presentations.

Exhibitors and sponsors felt that there was value in participating in the AES conference, in particular making connections in the evaluation sector and receiving feedback about products.

Social media activities did not appear to have a high level of impact among participants at the conference, although it may have been useful for non-attending evaluators, though this was not assessed.

Organisation and logistics

Although Darwin 2014 is considered a success, there were some major challenges that impacted on the event and assessed as part of this evaluation to provide context and areas for improving future conferences.

Contextual factors impacted heavily on Darwin 2014, in particular changes to the AES' staff profile, AES budget deficits following financial year 2012-13, the choice not to contract out the event management, and the relatively small AES membership base in Darwin.

The conference venue was considered to be a major contributor to the success of the conference, both for participants and the AES, having been provided in-kind by CDU. The conference food and social programs were important for showcasing Darwin and the AES.

In the initial planning stages of the Darwin conference, there was a degree of divergence between the members of the conference organising committee, comprising AES NT members, Board members and staff. Subsequently, the committee was reorganised in a way that promoted a sense of commitment by group members. A small group of NT volunteers from the committee worked to overcome time lost due to divergences and bought the planning back on line. The processes did create excessive workloads on the core group. During this period, a paid project officer was appointed. This position was located in Darwin.

Additionally, instabilities with AES staffing that were occurring at this time impacted on conference planning workloads and created additional tensions. In June 2014, the current AES Executive Officer was appointed bringing stability and timely assistance for the finalisation of the conference arrangements.

The risks associated with leaning too heavily on volunteers should be acknowledged. Additionally, there was some uncertainty among Darwin organisers about the role of AES Board members in event planning activities. However, it should be acknowledged

that although difficult to navigate at times, the success of the conference should, at least in part, be attributed to the in-house organisation of the event.

The annual rotation of event organisers and host cities presents a risk to the AES, with host city organisers' involvement limited to a 12 month term resulting in the need to build the event management capacity of host city organisers for each event.

The suggested conference accommodation caused logistical difficulties for the AES, with transport needing to be provided, and for participants, some of whom felt isolated from many of Darwin's major attractions.

The conference program supported a balance of presentations and networking opportunities for participants. The conference theme was very broad and open to interpretation, rather than providing a highly targeted focus for the conference. There is a need to consider an appropriate balance between the quantity of presentations and the maintenance of quality standards. Various analogous conferences focus more on attracting keynote speakers for plenary discussions or hosting eminent panel sessions rather than a large variety of concurrent sessions.

The program required frequent changes during the conference, with resultant changes to presentation schedules and rooms. This caused confusion among participants, who largely selected their desired sessions based on programs that were printed in advance.

Strategic alignment

The AES conference does not have a consolidated set of documented objectives and instead, seeks to support the broader AES goals.

Subsequently, the goals below have been used in this evaluation to assess the overall performance with the following results:

- **attendance** exceeded targets, with over 300 registered participants
- **participation** at the conference was broad, with attendees from a variety of locations, sectors and levels of prior evaluation expertise
- **relevance** of the conference was supported by a balance of networking and sessions
- **profit** exceeded expectations
- **reputation** of the AES and the evaluation field were enhanced.

Opportunities for improvement

Information gathered from the various data collections used in this evaluation suggest that the AES could further consider:

- agreeing AES' goals for the conference to aid decision-making and future planning.
- the optimal delivery structures for future conferences, including:
 - › the roles, responsibilities, decision-making authority and communications between the host city organisers and the AES
 - › the benefits and downsides of continuing to rotate the conference on an eight year cycle, relative to the AES' goals for the conference
 - › the optimal organisational structures to support the conference, potentially involving the formation of a standing AES Conference sub-committee with standing roles for AES Board members and rolling three-year terms for host city organisers (first year as an observer, second year as the conference host, third year as a mentor/advisor or strategic planner)

- › the level of representation and involvement in conference planning by AES Board members, and the role of the AES Executive Officer and other AES staff in leading the conference
 - › protocols, templates and plans to be prepared for hosts to aid delivery
 - › additional support required to attract sponsors/exhibitors of conference participants, or to transition conference attendees into AES members
- the conference programme, including:
- › the number and length of papers, noting a preference among participants for fewer, longer discussions and interactive sessions
 - › whether to select a broad or specific conference theme
 - › whether the conference streams are required and if so, whether they could be aligned to particular rooms
 - › whether presentations could be marked with an additional field to note the target audience to enable participants to attend sessions based on their levels of prior exposure to evaluation theory (minimal, moderate or advanced)
 - › ways to maximise the involvement of keynote speakers, potentially by augmenting plenary presentations with follow-up workshops for more in-depth discussion about areas of expertise with advanced practitioners
 - › how the timing of sessions could be better aligned to avoid gaps in the program
 - › ways to maintain delegate awareness of changes to the program in real time, in particularly considering ways to avoid settling a version of the program in hard copy, which becomes rapidly outdated
 - › the potential for presenter guidelines to mandate high levels of interactivity with participants and provide a quality assurance foundation
 - › ability to use new-media to share a selection of key presentations online to non-attending AES members and others interested in evaluation, in order to showcase the conference and drive future attendance
 - › ways to ensure that presentations focus on innovation and new paradigms in evaluation
 - › include more practical workshops in conference schedule
- maximising enjoyment and sense of conference value among participants:
- › ensuring that the conference remains authentic to place through the consideration of factors that maximise informality, sociability, interaction and inclusiveness
 - › establishing centralised and easily accessible accommodation and transport options to enhance the delegate experience
 - › providing a centralised location for sponsors and exhibitors
 - › providing presenters with detailed information about technology availability before the conference
 - › defining and embedding the principles of adult learning throughout conference activities
 - › establishing structured networking activities
 - › defining the purpose of social media and design its use to maximise its aim
 - › establishing timelines for dissemination of information before, during and after the conference.

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Part One

BACKGROUND TO
THE AES
CONFERENCE AND
THE EVALUATION

I

1 About the AES Conference

1.1 Introduction and report outline

This evaluation report is structured as follows.

Part 1 - Background to the AES Conference and the evaluation

- *Chapter 1* -- About the AES conference, including a summary of findings from the AES Brisbane 2013 conference and an overview of Darwin 2014.
- *Chapter 2* -- The evaluation methodology, scope and limitations

Part 2 - The participant experience, organisation and logistics & strategic alignment

- *Chapter 3* -- Findings regarding the participant experience
- *Chapter 4* -- Findings regarding organisation and logistics
- *Chapter 5* -- Findings regarding strategic alignment of the conference to AES' goals and future directions

Part 3 - Appendices

- Appendix A -- Summary of findings from the Brisbane Convenors' report
- Appendix B -- Roles and responsibilities for organising the conference
- Appendix C -- Data collection response samples
- Appendix D -- Comparison with other conferences
- Appendix E -- Case study responses (full text, for AES only)

A full report on the post conference surveys, including delegate characteristics and detailed findings from all questions has been provided separately to the AES.

The AES has also been provided with updated data collection tools for future use.

1.2 The Australasian Evaluation Society

1.2.1 AES' objectives

The Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) is a professional organisation for people involved in evaluation including evaluation practitioners, managers, teachers and students of evaluation as well as other interested individuals. It has close to 900 members involved in all aspects of evaluation and performance measurement. The AES is governed by a Board of members and managed by an Executive Officer and staff (AES, 2014a).

The AES' vision is for 'quality evaluation that makes a difference', while its mission is 'to strengthen and promote evaluation practice, theory and use'. In addition, its values seek to promote the AES *Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations*.

The AES supports evaluation practice improvement through meetings of regional networks, committees and Special Interest Groups (SIG). The AES also supports professional development through regular workshops and seminars.

1.2.2 The annual AES Conference

The conference is AES' largest professional development focus each year and draws together people involved in evaluation from Australia, New Zealand, and the Asia-Pacific and further afield. The conference has traditionally included several days of pre-conference workshops, followed by two to three days of conference activities.

The conference is the AES major annual source of revenue, generated through registration fees paid by attendees. It has flow-on revenue through the pre-conference workshop program and other miscellaneous evaluation forums in other locations held after the conference, for example through additional speaking engagements that may be conducted by keynote speakers.

The conference facilitates key AES corporate activities, including meetings of SIGs, conduct of the Annual General Meeting and announcing the winners of the annual evaluation awards. It provides an important forum to build the AES' brand, reputation, membership base and networks.

1.3 Conference history

AES conferences have been held for at least a decade. The AES rotates the host city between major Australian and New Zealand centres. Prior to Darwin 2014, the cycle included:

- Darwin 2006.
- Melbourne 2007
- Perth 2008
- Canberra 2009
- Wellington 2010
- Sydney 2011
- Adelaide 2012
- Brisbane 2013.

The 2015 conference will be held in Melbourne in September. Its theme is 'reaching across boundaries'.

Major features of Brisbane 2013

In evaluating the Darwin 2014 conference, it was important to consider the lessons from Brisbane 2013. This conference was organised by the AES in collaboration with a Brisbane-based committee and with event management support contracted out to Arinex. Appendix A summarises findings from the post-event Brisbane Convenor's report.

Key features of the Brisbane conference included:

- two days of workshops and three days of conference activities
- plenary sessions led by five keynote speakers
- 105 presentations (roundtables, symposia, mini-workshops, short papers and long papers)
- 449 participants in attendance from 17 countries, including 411 paying customers
- 311 registrants for 22 workshops conducted over the 2.5 days prior to the conference
- 8 event sponsors.

The Brisbane conference focused on:

- promoting the use of social media, especially in the question and answer session
- providing the conference program online for phone and iPad, enabling live updates to be made to program schedules, though a hard copy guide was also produced
- establishing a Yari space for Indigenous peoples to meet and for non-Indigenous people to find out about local culture.

The event featured a social program, including an international delegate dinner, a social hour at the conference bar, an early morning meeting for first-time attendees and early morning guided walks.

The 2014 AES Annual Report noted that the Brisbane conference delivered a profit of \$103,619. This is an increase of \$58,469 on the profit achieved by the Adelaide conference the previous year.

The Brisbane conference was evaluated using a post-event survey of participants. Conclusions, considerations regarding evaluation and recommendations are outlined in Box 1, quoting the evaluation report.

Box 1 FINDINGS FROM THE EVALUATION OF THE 2013 AES CONFERENCE IN BRISBANE

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

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

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

Considerations for future conference evaluations

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

Recommendations

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

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

Source: Turner, D. (2014) AES 2013 Conference Evaluation (unpublished).

1.4 About Darwin 2014

Overview

The Darwin Conference was held between 8 and 12 September 2014 at the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges (ACIKE), located at the Casuarina Campus of Charles Darwin University (CDU). Seven meetings spaces were used including the Mal Nairn Auditorium that hosted plenary sessions. The conference's theme was 'unleashing the power of evaluation'.

The conference included two days of pre-conference workshops (Monday and Tuesday), a conference opening (Tuesday evening) and two and a half days of conference presentations (Wednesday, Thursday and Friday morning).

Pre-conference workshops

The first two days involved pre-conference workshops. This included five full day and four half-day workshops on subjects in evaluation, as listed below.

Half day

- Real-time evaluation: theory and practice
- Quality in qualitative research and evaluation: what do we need to know?
- An introduction to the essential competencies for program evaluators
- Designing and embedding strategic learning and performing systems for organisations, departments, programmes and projects.

Full day

- Evaluation by us, for us: what is required of AES to strengthen and support Indigenous evaluation?
- Quantifying the impact of a non-randomised intervention: statistical methods for non-statisticians
- Data visualisation in evaluation
- First, do no further harm
- Unleashing the power of story in evaluation: performance stories, episode studies and the most significant change technique.

Conference opening

The event was officially opened during the late afternoon on the second day of the conference. It was chaired by the outgoing AES President and included an address from the CDU Pro Vice-Chancellor (and keynote speaker). A Welcome to Country was completed by Aunty June Mills, a Larrakia Traditional Owner, followed by traditional dance by One Mob Different Country - a group of dancers from different communities across the Northern Territory.

The conference program

The conference combined various types of sessions including plenary sessions, short papers, mini workshops, linked presentations, symposia, roundtables, book clubs, innovative presentations and panel sessions. Presentation durations ranged from 30

minutes to a maximum of 1 hour 45 minutes. Papers were delivered under several conference streams being:

- Evaluation and value
- Evaluation capacity building
- Influence and impact
- Responsive and responsible practices
- Theory and methodology
- Technology
- Essential skills and understandings
- Large-scale systems and interventions.

Other activities for participants were conducted during the conference including the international conference dinner and awards evening, a visit to the Mindil Beach Sunset markets, a social event for graduate researchers, the AES Annual General Meeting (AGM), awarding of the Rosalind Hurworth Prize for the best full conference paper, an interactive poster session and 'talking up evaluation' feedback wall, an evaluation book club meeting, a forum on ethics hosted by AES fellows, AES committees and special interest group meetings, launch of the evaluation issue of the Northern Institute's *Learning Communities* journal, hosting an exhibition and market space, wisdom cafes for lunchtime discussions, panel discussions regarding the implications of the *Public Governance and Accountability Act 2013* and hosting an Indigenous peoples network area and special forum to build the capacity of Indigenous evaluators.

2 Evaluation Background

2.1 Rationale and scope of the evaluation

Documented scope of the evaluation

The project brief prepared by the AES described some 'worrying trends' identified through the evaluation of the 2013 Brisbane AES Conference. These included lower levels of participant satisfaction relative to prior years, little focus on innovative ideas and evaluation methods, and limited success in the use of social media and alternative session formats.

In response, the AES sought to evaluate the Darwin 2014 conference in relation to:

- how well the conference captured its theme 'unleashing the power of evaluation'
- how the conference included the views of keynote speakers, workshop facilitators, the conference committee, other AES committee members, and conference exhibitors/sponsors
- how the conference program was able to address new, leading edge ideas and evaluation approaches
- how participant satisfaction could be further increased
- how the conference evaluation could be used to support the AES in improving future conferences.

The brief also noted an intention for the evaluation to reflect on the efficiency, effectiveness and target audience for the conference, and to identify good practices, with the aim of rejuvenating the event in future.

Negotiated scope of the evaluation

Two evaluation fellows, both of whom are AES Board members, were selected to guide the evaluators in the planning and conduct of the evaluation. It was agreed that the AES' documented scope was somewhat generalised and would be difficult to achieve within the given timeframe with the limited resources. Through a series of discussions with the evaluation fellows, AES Board members and key Darwin event organisers to gauge interests from the evaluation, three key themes were distilled. These then formed the basis for the evaluation, key questions and associated data collection methods, as shown in Box 2. These are reflected through the chapters of this evaluation report.

Box 2 KEY THEMES, QUESTIONS AND SUB-QUESTIONS

The participant experience: Overall, did the conference attendees perceive there was value in attending the conference?

- › Why did participants choose to attend the AES conference?
- › Did the conference deliver on these expectations?
- › What elements of the conference are most valuable to participants?
- › How could the conference be improved in future?

Logistics and organisation: To what extent did the event organisers and the AES feel the conference organisation process was effective in 2014?

- › What worked well in organising Darwin 2014?
- › What were the major challenges in organising Darwin 2014?
- › What could be learned to improve the organisation of the conference in future years?

Strategic alignment: To what extent was the conference effective in achieving AES' goals?

- › What were the AES' strategic objectives for Darwin 2014?
- › To what extent did Darwin 2014 deliver on AES' strategic objectives?
- › How should AES' strategic objectives change in future?
- › What changes could be made to the conference to achieve the AES' future strategic objectives?

A project plan was developed based on these three areas of inquiry and linked to various data collection tools. This evaluation report responds to the key themes, questions and sub-questions.

2.2 Data collection tools

Table 1 provides an outline of the variety of data collection methods used and their execution. Descriptions of each method, steps in its implementation, metrics (population sample and numbers involved in each tool), and reflections regarding benefits and limitations associated with each tool are included.

Further information about the samples for each data tool are at Appendix C.

Table 1 RESEARCH METHODS USED

Method	Description of tool	Implementation method	Total population	Sample completed	Key benefits of implementing the tool	Key challenges of implementing the tool
Pre-conference						
Unstructured planning interviews	Unstructured interviews with Darwin 2014 organisers (2), Brisbane 2013 organisers (1) and the AES Executive Officer (1), to clarify areas of focus for the evaluation	Introductory email sent by Evaluation Fellow to selection of key contacts, inviting to interview Follow-up emails sent by evaluators to confirm times Discussions held to gauge areas of interest, with key points added to shared Excel sheet for notes	N/a	5	Personal priorities of key contacts clear from outset Improved contextual understanding of conference Demonstrated buy-in to evaluation by key contacts	Some interviewees not responsive to invitations Lack of a shared perspective about the role and focus of the evaluation
Preliminary document review	Review of available information reflecting on prior conferences, including Brisbane 2013	Following interviews, seek available information regarding prior conferences, including the post-conference convenors' report for Brisbane Review the 2012 and 2013 evaluation reports, along with longitudinal post-event survey data	N/a	4	Lessons and major challenges from prior years clear	Unclear how Darwin had adapted in response to numerous lessons from Brisbane 2013
During conference						
Participant face-to-face surveys	Informal discussions with conference participants about five broad themes: rationale for attending, whether expectations were being met, positives, negatives and ideas for the future. Linked demographic indicators were collected	Template developed and approved during planning phase Discussions held with people during breaks on Days 3, 4 & 5 of the conference Completed forms compiled for thematic analysis	327	32	Opportunity to engage with participants directly Provided an avenue for participants to share thoughts openly Rich data against several key questions	Potential selection bias in individuals approached Limited sample completed Each survey required more time than anticipated Template included some minor repetition
Participant case studies	Pro forma provided to selected participants to share reflections: how they became involved in evaluation; why evaluation is important to them now; main motivations for attending; and main messages to improve conference in future. Linked demographic indicators were collected	Two-page pro forma developed and approved during planning phase Pro forma distributed to participants selected by evaluators Completed forms collected at a later point in the conference Responses transcribed verbatim for inclusion in final report	327	7	Easy to distribute forms Responses provided direct information for final reports	Potential selection bias in individuals approached Limited sample completed, given face-to-face surveys provided more personal involvement for participants Some shared forms not returned by participants Variable depth of responses
Participant written feedback	Three questions asked of attendees prior to a Plenary session: what they like and think should be kept; what should be changed; and suggestions for the next conference. No linked demographic indicators were collected	MC at Plenary session on Day 4 asked all participants to respond to three questions Responses collected at exit to plenary theatre Results themed overnight and reported back to participants the following day	327	46	Crowd-sourcing approach to engaging participants rapidly Responses received to targeted set of questions Feedback loop allowed sharing of findings	Likely double-up in responses collected using other data collection tools No identifiers associated with responses so inability to analyse results more deeply

Method	Description of tool	Implementation method	Total population	Sample completed	Key benefits of implementing the tool	Key challenges of implementing the tool
Participant free-range focus group	Open forum regarding the conference, held in the last session on the final day of the conference	In the unexpected absence of a speaker, a focus group was held reflecting on the conference Hand-written notes were taken	327	15	Keynote speaker involved and engaged in facilitated discussion	Only one evaluator present Only sparse notes taken.
Semi-structured interviews	Interviews held with AES Executive Officer (1), a selection of AES Board members (2), an AES Fellow (1) and Darwin event organisers (5) to gauge views regarding Darwin and strategic directions	Interview guides tailored for each respondent group In some cases, interview guides circulated in advance Interviews conducted and recorded using AudioNote for cross-team sharing Key themes identified to help generate findings	n/a	9	Valuable engagement with AES decision-makers Provided organisers with an outlet to capture challenges Informal and flexible timing supported open discussions	Two interviews were delayed until after the event due to prior commitments at the conference Audio recordings hard to hear in crowded rooms
Survey of exhibitors/sponsors	Six question survey of sponsors/exhibitors to gauge perceived value, clarity of direction from AES, future likelihood of sponsoring/exhibiting, key reasons likely to influence decision, and suggestions for improvement in 2015	Template developed and approved during planning phase Hard copy survey provided to stall holders on Day 4 Forms returned by conclusion of the conference	5	5	Important tool to understand how to generate additional support in future Easy to administer	Timing of distribution not established in advance Contacts manning stalls unlikely to be key decision-makers for 2015
Post conference						
Post event attendee survey	25 question survey of participants to provide an opportunity for reflection on the conference	Development of survey tool for attendees Authorisation of survey through AES, facilitated by evaluation fellows Circulation to attendees by AES Responses in Survey Monkey for analysis	327	107	Ability to gauge changes in satisfaction in 2014 and over time Captured responses to key participant questions Survey monkey compiles responses for easy analysis (no data entry) Reasonable response rate (approximately 1/3 rd)	Likely double-up in responses collected using other data collection tools Questions from prior evaluations needed to be adapted Lengthy process of negotiation to agree new set of questions Absence of AES Executive Officer delayed circulation of survey to November 2014.
Post-event non-participant survey	6 question survey of AES members who did not attend the 2014 conference to understand reasons why some members did not attend	Development of survey tool for non-attendees Authorisation of survey through AES, facilitated by evaluation fellows Circulation to all AES members by AES for response by those who did not attend Darwin Responses in Survey Monkey for analysis	Up to 900	146	Collection of a new data source to provide a pseudo counter-factual Reasonable response rate Clearer understanding of reasons for non-attendance by AES members	Difficult to identify email addresses for non-attending AES members, so email sent to all AES members instead Unknown total sample size Inability to test reasons for non-attendance by non-AES members

Method	Description of tool	Implementation method	Total population	Sample completed	Key benefits of implementing the tool	Key challenges of implementing the tool
Benchmarking	Building on issues identified through the evaluation in relation to the conference programme, the literature review was tailored to involve a review of other conference structures, formats and innovations to identify event options for consideration by the AES	Discussions with evaluation fellows to cement scope for literature review Website scan for other major evaluation and related conferences in Australia and worldwide Development of comparison table to gauge differences between the AES and others	n/a	n/a	Improved understanding about analogous events in Australia and internationally Identification of potential innovations in format and structure <i>Ex post</i> literature review enabled targeted analysis to address identified issues	Selective process required to identify comparator conferences Constrained by public availability of data regarding conference programming
Additional document review	Review of relevant information relevant to the conference and AES' strategic directions	Access and review documents, such as the AES Annual Report and materials provided regarding Darwin 2014, to understand strategic organisational directions	n/a	n/a	Improved understanding of the AES receiving environment	<i>Ad hoc</i> information regarding Darwin 2014, rather than all relevant material

2.3 Evaluation deliverables

The evaluation provides the AES Board with:

- A suite of conference evaluation tools for future use (provided separately)
- Evaluation reports providing summative findings regarding Darwin 2014 and formative findings for future conferences.

Suite of evaluation tools

The data collection tools provided separately include:

- *Interview guides*, that provide a clear format and set of questions that may be repeated, with some tailoring required each year to fit the event context
- *Participant face-to-face surveys*, that could be replicated annually, with minor adaptations to their areas of focus, if desired
- *Participant case studies*, that are replicable in future with only minor adjustments required
- *The post event attendee survey*, that may be repeated each year to generate longitudinal data
- *The post-event non-participant survey*, that may be repeated annually
- *The exhibitor/sponsor survey* that may be repeated annually.

These have been updated following the evaluation to remedy issues encountered.



Part Two

THE PARTICIPANT
EXPERIENCE,
ORGANISATION
AND LOGISTICS &
STRATEGIC
ALIGNMENT

II

3 The participant experience

3.1 Data collection and analysis

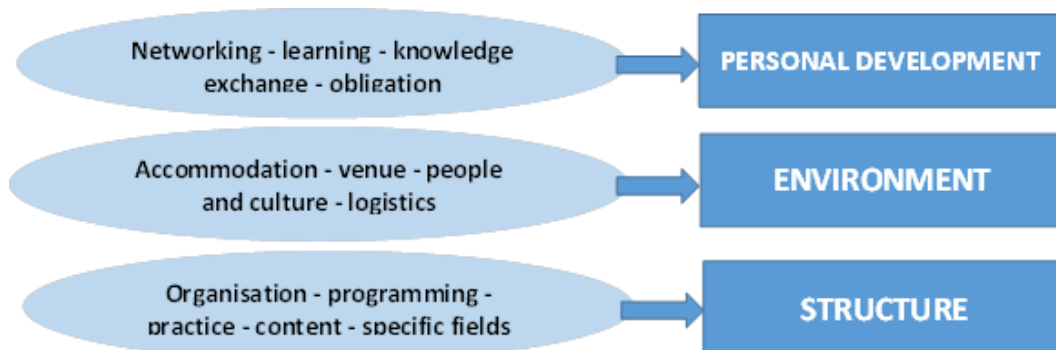
3.1.1 Analysis approach

This chapter draws on the results of various data collection tools. A full report on the post event attendee survey, including delegate characteristics and detailed findings from all questions has been provided separately to the AES.

The evaluation, being multi-method and qualitative in approach, predominantly used a grounded theory perspective in collecting, revising and analysing data. This commenced with a content analysis document review of historical and background information to provide insight into the socio, political and economic context of the AES conferences. This included review of previous AES conference evaluations, a reflection paper by the local convenor of the Brisbane AES conference, AES annual reports, vision statement and objectives published on the AES website. This set the focus for exploring ideas with AES Board members and staff and guided data collection methods.

Review of the data tools sought to gauge emerging patterns and themes to guide the development of codes and sub codes in which the findings are framed. A set of themes emerged, comprising elements detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1 **EMERGING THEMES FROM PARTICIPANT DATA COLLECTION**



Key Questions

These themes help to answer the key evaluation questions and sub-questions about the participant experience. The key questions explored in this chapter are:

- Overall, did the conference attendees perceive there was value in attending the conference?
 - › Why did participants choose to attend the AES conference?
 - › Did the conference deliver on these expectations?

- › What elements of the conference are most valuable to participants?
- › How could the conference be improved in future?

The discussion sections outlined in this chapter are drawn from participants' suggestions for future conferences. This includes participant face-to-face surveys, the participant written feedback, the post event attendee survey, the post-event non-participant survey and discussions held at the free range focus session.

3.2 Overall value of the conference

The prime evaluation question relates to whether the conference provided value to those that attended. The analysis found that the Darwin 2014 conference has largely been a success for participants. Evidence of this finding comes largely from the post-conference attendee survey 2014 that asked respondents to rate the value of the conference. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 **OVERALL VALUE OF THE CONFERENCE, DARWIN 2014**

Answer choices	Responses
It was extremely valuable	34% n=36
It was fairly valuable	51% n=54
It was of some value, but not a great deal	13% n=14
It was a waste of time	2% n=2
Total	100% n=106

Question: Overall, how valuable was the conference for you?

Source: Post event attendee survey, 2014

Compared to previous years, the satisfaction rates among participants responding to the post-conference attendee survey 2014 increased. In particular, compared to the 2013 post event attendee survey, the proportion of respondents that were 'highly satisfied' rose in Darwin from 16% to 32%, while those that were satisfied rose from 49% to 56%. Darwin 2014 registered only 4% of respondents who were 'dissatisfied', whereas Brisbane registered 7% who were 'dissatisfied' and 1% who were 'highly dissatisfied'. Changes in satisfaction rates are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 **OVERALL CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE**

	Sydney 2011	Adelaide 2012	Brisbane 2013	Darwin 2014
Very dissatisfied	1%	1%	1%	0%
Dissatisfied	3%	4%	7%	4%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	15%	19%	28%	8%
Satisfied	50%	56%	49%	56%
Highly satisfied	31%	20%	16%	32%

Note: Question: Please rate your satisfaction with the overall conference experience

2011 - 324 responses; 2012 - 233 responses; 2013 - 179 responses, 2014 - 107 responses

Source: Post event attendee surveys 2011 to 2014.

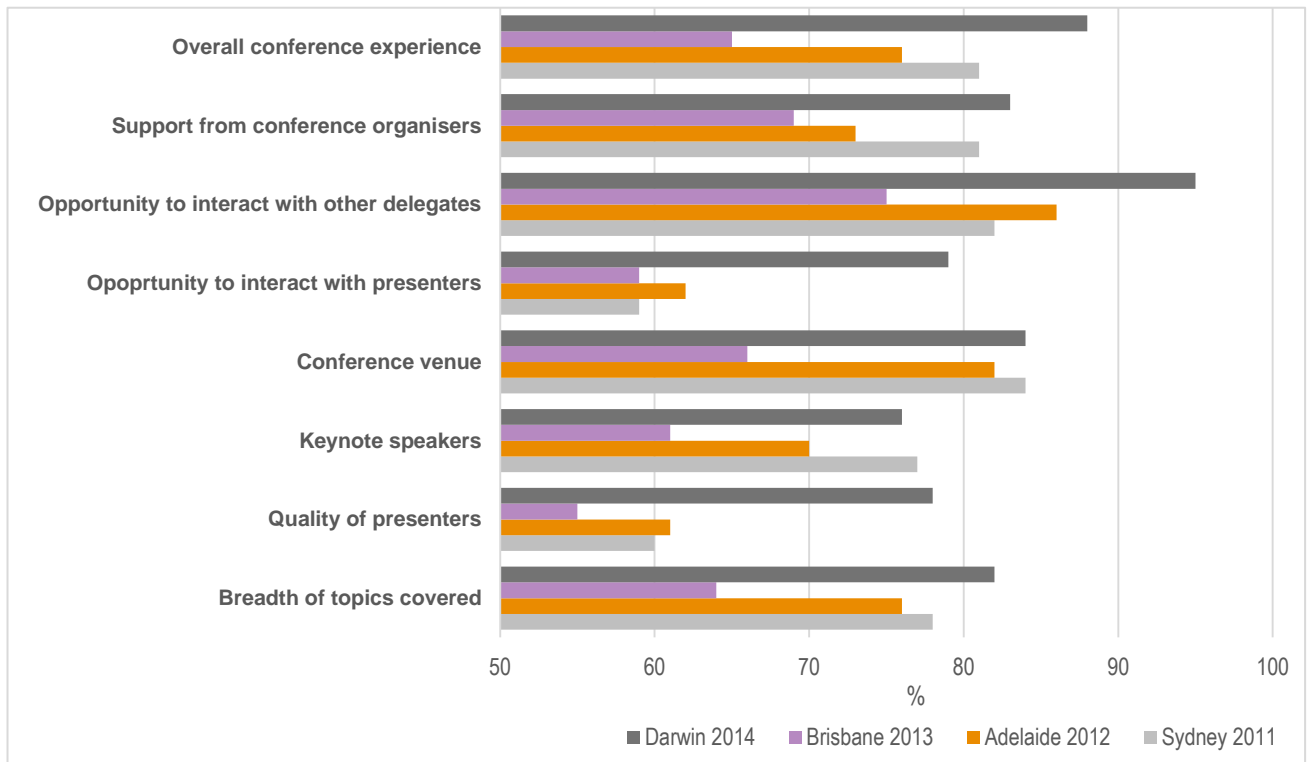
3.3 Satisfaction with major conference features

Darwin 2014 rated higher among attendees than previous conferences on almost all measures of its major features, including support from conference organisers,

opportunity to interact with other participants, opportunity to interact with presenters, the conference venue, keynote speakers, quality of presenters, and breadth of topics.

Response rates among those who were satisfied or highly satisfied (combined) with various conference elements between 2011 and 2014 are shown Figure 2.

Figure 2 **PARTICIPANT SATISFACTION WITH CONFERENCE ELEMENTS 2011 TO 2014**



Note: Satisfaction includes responses of 'highly satisfied' and 'satisfied'. Other response points include 'neither satisfied or dissatisfied', 'dissatisfied' and 'very dissatisfied'.

Source: AES post event attendee survey: 2011, 2012, 2013 & 2014

The post-conference attendee survey 2014 asked Darwin 2014 attendees whether they intended to go to the AES 2015 conference in Melbourne. Of 102 responses, 41% (n=42) felt they would 'definitely/highly likely' attend, while 25% (n=25) said that they would 'probably' attend or considered it a '50/50 chance' that they would attend (19%, n=19).

Reflections were sought on whether the value of attending the conference increased for participants over time. A total of 55% (n=34) of respondents said that they would rate AES conferences as remaining of the same value year-to-year, whilst 35% (n=22) said that the conferences are becoming more valuable to them each year.

Key Finding

The Darwin 2014 conference was considered a success by attendees, with improved post-event satisfaction ratings compared to Brisbane 2013, Adelaide 2012 and Sydney 2011.

3.4 Professional development

3.4.1 Overview

Reasons for attending previous AES conferences

Post-conference attendee survey 2014 responses for previous conferences emphasised training and professional development and networking as the predominant reasons for their attendance. Table 4 provides a comparison of participant reasons for attending the conference. Note that Darwin 2014 is not included in Table 4 as the question was revised in the post event attendee survey. Instead, results for Darwin are reflected below.

Table 4 **MAIN REASONS FOR ATTENDING THE CONFERENCE**

	Training and professional development opportunities	Networking
Sydney 2011	80%	56%
Adelaide 2012	75%	56%
Brisbane 2013	79%	56%

Note: Multiple responses allowed.

Source: AES Conference Attendee Survey 2001, 2012, 2013

Major reasons for attending Darwin 2014

The post-conference attendee survey 2014 asked participants about their major reasons for attending. Responses demonstrated that networking, the papers in parallel sessions, the location and the timing of the conference formed part of participants' motivation to attend, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 **REASONS FOR ATTENDING DARWIN 2014**

Major reason for attending	Response rate and number
The networking opportunities seemed valuable	62.6% (n=67)
There were good papers for me in the parallel sessions	41.1% (n=44)
The keynote speakers seemed interesting	36.5% (n=39)
The location (Darwin) was attractive	34.6% (n=37)
The timing fit well with other work/study/family commitments	18.7% (n=20)
The cost of conference registration seemed like good value	6.5% (n=7)
The cost of travel wasn't too high (including flights, accommodation)	1.9% (n=2)

Question: What were your main reasons for attending the 2014 AES conference in Darwin? (Note: Multiple responses were allowed).

Source: Post event attendee survey, 2014

Drawn from analysis across various data sources, some of the major reasons for attendance are described below.

Professional development

Participants noted that a major reason for attending the conference was to pursue professional development opportunities. This was evidenced through the various data

collection tools, including participant face-to-face surveys (response rates of 91% stating professional development goals), post event attendee surveys (63% referenced professional development), and a further 58% of open text responses for the post event attendee surveys.

Similarly, half (n=16) of the face-to-face participant survey respondents reported professional development as a major expectations of the conference. This included developing competencies in evaluation and making links with other evaluators across the diversity of the sector, validating their own methods and practice, learning something new and conversing with other participants, presenters and keynote speakers.

Networking

Another major reason for attending the conference that was noted across all datasets was the networking opportunities available to conference participants. This included:

- making new contacts
- connecting with people who are geographically dispersed
- connecting with a diverse group of people and backgrounds within the evaluation sector
- discussing ideas with keynote speakers.

Knowledge exchange

A further reason for attendance was to support the exchange of knowledge, described by participants as the opportunity to:

- learn from others
- share ideas, challenges and triumphs
- present work and projects
- engage in debates and discussions about new practice and methods
- gain insights on different perspectives.

The ability to learn from others was reported by respondents as a major drawcard of the conference. Several respondents hoped that the conference would provide the basis for further learning, with exposure to real case studies to contextualise personal learning in research and evaluation. Other learning opportunities included:

- learning from leading edge practitioners
- exposure to new methods and approaches
- niche techniques such as working in small teams, with specific cohorts and in specific sectors
- renewing personal motivation for evaluation.

Non-attendee survey findings

Of those AES members that did not attend Darwin 2014, but completed the non-attendee survey, 40% said that they really wanted to go to Darwin but could not make it, whilst 46% wanted to go but did not mind missing out.

It should be noted that 41% of respondents to the non-attendee survey have never attended an AES conference.

3.4.2 Discussion

Increase the focus on practical skills development

Participants noted a desire for practical workshops on evaluation methods and practice, innovative approaches and step by step practice sessions to enhance professional learning. This was emphasised through free range focus groups, responses to written feedback and participant face-to-face surveys. This reflects the interests of participants to increase their knowledge rather than merely consolidating their existing knowledge.

Of potential concern is the responses to questions in the post conference survey about professional learning. Of 102 respondents to the post conference attendee survey:

- 16% said that the conference did not provide any new understanding about new research/evaluation approaches
- 20% did not get any new understanding of the value and use of evaluation methods
- 21% did not gain any research and evaluation skills from the conference.

This apparent disconnect between what people want from the conference and what they gained in terms of professional development in specific practical areas is an area for further investigation by the AES.

Promote structured networking activities

Nine respondents to the participant face-to-face survey and written feedback noted that networking opportunities were a highlight of the conference, with particular reference to the diversity of other participants and presenters, the learning opportunities and the ability to present and share work.

Participants raised the idea for the provision of structured networking activities, such as card swap activities, a business card board or speed networking sessions. Structured networking activities may be particularly useful for participants who are new to the sector and lack an established set of evaluation contacts.

Key Finding

A major motivation for participants to attend Darwin 2014 was to pursue professional learning opportunities, to network with others in the evaluation field and to exchange knowledge. Some participants felt that they would have benefited from more practical workshops at the conference.

3.5 Environment

3.5.1 Overview

The Darwin event location

The Darwin location presented a reason for some participants to attend. In the open text response section of the post event attendee survey, 35% of respondents noted that they chose to attend the conference due to its Darwin location whilst 9% of participant face-to-face survey respondents stated this as one of the reasons for attending.

However, while the Darwin location was attractive for some, it proved a deterrent to others. The post-event non-attendee survey of AES members identified that 56% of respondents felt that the cost of travel to Darwin was too high, while 46% reported that they could not afford the time away from work. This is particularly pertinent to practitioners that self-fund conference attendance.

Conference spaces

Comparing the conference to previous years, participants in the free range session identified elements of the environmental space that they felt supported the success of the conference that could be built on for future events. This comprised:

- an atmospheric open air location
- limited seating for meal breaks, which supported mingling and open discussion
- a relaxed and friendly vibe throughout the conference.

With these elements also arising as a theme in the face-to-face participant surveys, written feedback and post event attendee surveys, they are worthy of further exploration. Respondents spoke of the Darwin location as providing the vibe specific to weather and cultural distinctions of place.

Conference venue

84% (n=89) of respondents to the post-conference attendee survey 2014 noted they were highly satisfied or satisfied with the venue of the conference with many citing the relaxed, open air environment as a major contributor to their satisfaction.

3.5.2 Challenges

Accommodation

A number of respondents (18, 23%) to the participant face-to-face surveys and written feedback reported that the accommodation was too isolated from the venue, shops and public transport.

In addition, 12 participants noted that the start of the conference each day (8:00am) was too early, particularly when coupled with the distance to the venue and reliance on AES transport at set times. This made each conference day very long.

Venue navigation

Other environmental factors raised as issues included:

- The isolation of the poster and exhibitor/sponsor section (n=11)
- Difficulty in navigating around the venue and limited signage (n=7).

Although these issues are considered to be related particularly to Darwin 2014, they are nonetheless important to keep in mind for future conference planning activities.

3.5.3 Discussion

Remaining authentic to place

Key attributes of the Darwin environment may be able to be replicated in future through deliberate strategies aimed at recreating successful attributes. On deeper discussion with participants of the free range focus group, the attributes comprise:

- Informality
- Sociability
- Interaction
- Inclusiveness.

These attributes essentially focus on ensuring a welcoming environment for attendees to promote networking and learning in a relaxed and informal setting.

Venue and accommodation

In response to the issues associated with the accommodation in Darwin, respondents to various data collection instruments suggested that future conferences should identify a central venue with nearby accommodation. Participants suggested that accommodation should be within walking distance of the conference venue and have access to transport and amenities.

Limit use of disposable items

A small number of respondents of both the written feedback and post event attendee surveys considered it important to limit the use of disposable plates, cups and plastic food packaging. One respondent suggested that conference bags should contain a water bottle and that refilling stations could be dispersed throughout the venue to restrict the wastage of disposable cups.

Key Findings

The majority of attendees were satisfied with the Darwin 2014 venue, citing its relaxed, outdoor environment as a contributor to the overall success of the conference. More broadly, it could be surmised that attendees value venues that support informality, sociability, interaction and inclusiveness.

The perceived remoteness of the accommodation and early session start times presented challenges for some participants.

3.6 Structure

3.6.1 Overview

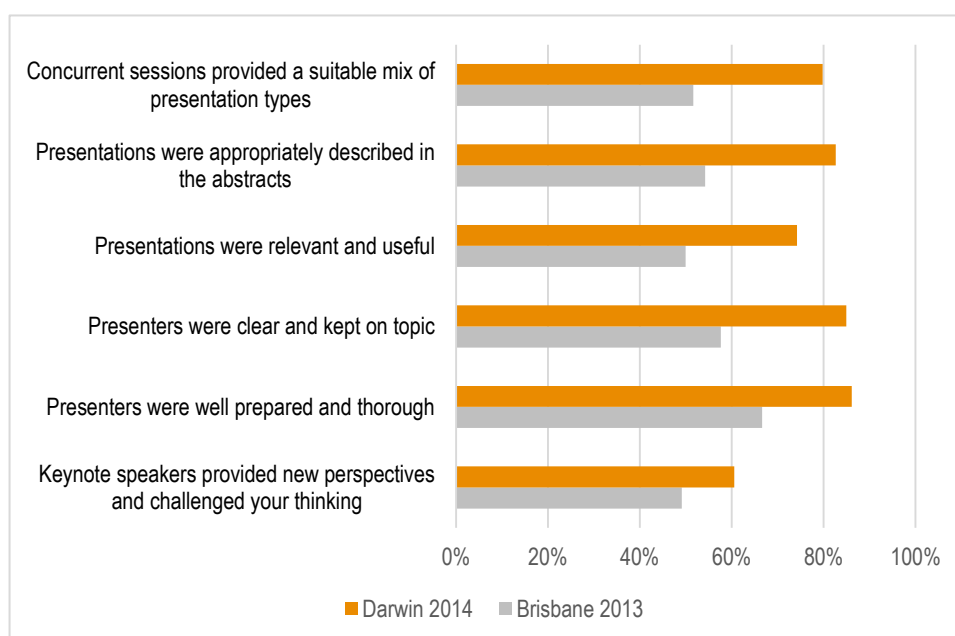
Participants were particularly interested in topics relating to the fields of evaluative work in which they were engaged. Ten respondents to the participant face-to-face surveys reported that their expectations of the conference were to provide content relevant to their sector and areas of practice. In particular, this included information about international development and the Indigenous specific stream. Participant expectations for Indigenous specific content were surpassed, in particular through the pre-conference Indigenous workshop on evaluation in Indigenous contexts, along with sessions

featuring other topics of interest. Some participants expressed desire for a similar focus on evaluation in the international development sphere.

Respondents to the post-conference attendee survey 2014 noted that the high quality of the keynote presenters was a highlight of the conference (n=51, 48% comments in free text responses). Professor Jean King in particular was highlighted as leading relevant discussion.

Post event attendee surveys sought views regarding the quality and types of presentations. Figure 3 shows that more positive responses were received following Darwin 2014 relative to Brisbane 2013 in relation to presentation quality.

Figure 3 PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS REGARDING SESSIONS ATTENDED



Note: Proportions show those responding 'all' or 'most' in relation to the question:

Source: AES Conference Attendee Survey, 2013 and 2014

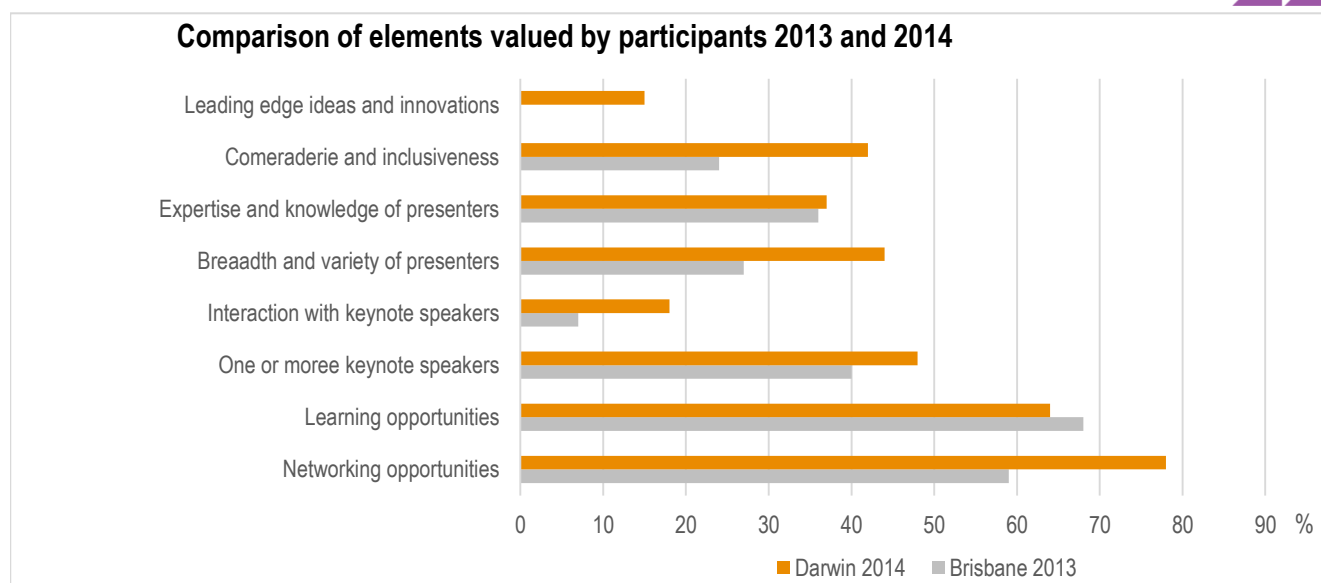
More generally, 44% (n=47) of post-conference attendee survey 2014 respondents expressed satisfaction with the breadth and diversity of presenters, while 17% (n=18) and 61% (n=65) respectively were highly satisfied or satisfied with the quality of presenters. A total of 37% (n=40) of responses noted that the camaraderie and inclusiveness of the conference was a highlight. As expressed by one respondent:

"I really want to emphasise the value of the camaraderie and inclusiveness. Unlike other conferences where people are reluctant to share their gems because they are surrounded by competitors, the AES conference feels like a meeting of minds where people are very open to sharing and truly want to support good evaluation practice in general."

Survey respondent

Figure 4 shows the comparison of elements participants valued most in Darwin 2014, relative to Brisbane 2013.

Figure 4 COMPARISON OF CONFERENCE ELEMENTS VALUED BY PARTICIPANTS 2013 AND 2014



Source: Post event attendee survey

Other highlights noted by participants from the face-to-face participant survey and written feedback included the wisdom cafes, various workshops (including those hosted by Jess Dart) and the event opening ceremony. Some noted the camaraderie, 'can do' attitude and organisational skills of the AES and Darwin team as conference organisers as worthy of congratulation.

3.6.2 Challenges

The predominant themes raised by respondents to the participant face-to-face survey and written feedback related to the structure and scheduling of sessions. It was stated that there were too many concurrent sessions ($n=15$, 19%) and that sessions were often too short ($n=7$). Responses to the open text responses in the post-conference attendee survey 2014 reported similar findings.

Other issues raised by attendees included:

- the variable quality of keynote sessions and other presenters ($n=8$)
- the need to pay for drinks at the opening ceremony ($n=6$)
- the cost of attending the conference as a self-funder ($n=4$).

Several respondents noted that the pre-conference information was an issue, with the early bird registration window closing prior to the release of the draft conference schedule.

3.6.3 Discussion

Presenters

The most prominent theme emerging from the conference and generating suggestions for future events concerned the diversity of presenter quality and need for guidelines to

assist future presenters. The need to maintain presentation quality was noted in post conference attendee survey respondents (n=5), face-to-face participant surveys, written feedback (n=3), the non-attendee survey (n=12) and was also a focus of discussion at the free range focus group.

Several respondents noted the success of roundtables with keynotes that occurred at the 2013 Brisbane conference and suggested that these return (n=3 post conference survey, 3 written responses and free range session). An additional seven respondents to participant face-to-face surveys and written feedback suggested that keynote speakers could provide more than one plenary session, or a plenary plus long paper or workshop with interested participants.

Sessions

Other themes raised by respondents concerned the desire for less concurrent sessions (n=5), longer sessions (n=4) and more debates (n=3). As discussed earlier, many participants sought to develop skills through workshop or mini-workshop structures. Where mini-workshop were held in Darwin, such as with Jess Dart, they were well-received.

The AES could further explore ways to define the right mix, length and type of session to address participant demand. Additionally, 9 respondents suggested that the principles of adult learning and interactivity be a predominant structural feature of conferences. Although the concept of adult learning was not clearly defined by participants, it is an area worthy of investigation and potentially embedding in future conferences to support the AES mission of strengthening and promoting evaluation practice, theory and use – essentially being a learning organisation.

The establishment of an innovation space was suggested by a handful of respondents (n=8) including in the free range session and participant face-to-face survey. On further questioning about what this comprises, there was not an agreed definition. However some suggested:

- a space where people could provide quick discussions on hot topics, “ignite sessions”¹, or 3 minute thesis pitches
- use of creative methods and improvisation techniques
- a review of conference structures, such as open space technology.

Streams

Five respondents noted that it would be of benefit if streams and sessions were identified by expertise level. This includes the expertise level of the presenter as well as the level of the audience that the session is aimed. Establishing such a system may assist participants of various backgrounds to navigate conference sessions.

Four respondents suggested the return of the international development stream while seven respondents suggested a stronger focus on health evaluation (six deriving from the non-attendee survey).

¹ See <http://2014conference.ning.com/ignite-sessions> for further information on ignite sessions.

Five respondents to the non-attendee survey suggested that the program should include more sessions for government employees. This was noted by two respondents to the post conference survey and in participant face-to-face survey discussions. There was an observation of the role of governments in being more involved in evaluation as evaluation practitioners, commissioners and managers of evaluation teams. It was suggested that sessions be included that feature the perspectives of evaluation commissioners and commercial elements.

In relation to streams, as referenced earlier, a number of respondents noted that the Indigenous stream was beneficial and suggested this be maintained and continue to evolve over time (n=5). To make sure that the Indigenous stream supports meaningful engagement to meet participant demands, further discussions are needed with AES members and specific Indigenous communities to agree on approaches. A small number of respondents noted that they felt the Indigenous stream was becoming too dominant at the conference, effectively overshadowing other cohorts that are subjects of evaluative research.

Cost

15 respondents to the post-conference attendee survey 2014 noted that affordability was an issue, particularly when the conference is located in another jurisdiction, with travel and accommodation costs in addition to registration.

The potential for scholarships to support conference attendance was raised (n=3). Although the AES provides a small number of scholarships already, it may be worthwhile for the AES to approach several organisations directly seeking to sponsor participants to attend. This could include non-government organisations, government departments or peak bodies.

Information resources

Six respondents to the participant face-to-face survey and written feedback noted the need for pre-conference information and program to be released prior to the closure of the early bird registration. Others sought handouts of presentations to be available at the conclusion of each session (n=6). Similarly, five respondents to the post-conference attendee survey 2014 suggested that post conference information be disseminated in a more timely manner and that participants be informed of these timelines.

Key Findings

The AES' goals to support evaluation in Indigenous contexts were met, though some participants also desire a focus on sessions relevant to their fields of work in international development and government.

Some participants noted the large number of concurrent sessions and short duration of many of those sessions causing difficulty in selecting and navigating session attendance.

While many presentations were well-received, some feedback noted variable quality among presenters. It was suggested that a presenter's kit needs to be prepared and that each session should be evaluated by attendees.

Variable levels of prior evaluation experience impacts on participants' abilities to engage in sessions. It was suggested that the program facilitate categorisation of sessions according to levels of pre-requisite knowledge required.

3.1 Presenter perspectives

Overview

A total of 57% (n=61) of post-conference attendee survey 2014 respondents presented at the conference. Of these, 23 presented a short oral paper, 28 a long paper, 10 a mini-workshop, 15 chaired sessions, eight presented posters, while others were involved in pre-conference workshops and panel discussions. One respondent was a keynote speaker.

Respondents were asked to rate a series of statements about their role at the conference. Two statements sought to gauge support provided by the AES in preparing presentations and delivery of presentations whilst the remainder of the statements were about presenters' experience of interacting with the audience, making contacts and developing materials for future publication. Compared to previous years' conferences, presenters at the 2014 conference generally had a high level of satisfaction with the support provided by AES and their respective participation at the conference as a presenter.

The value of IT/technical support at the conference was also assessed, with 68% of respondents reporting that it was extremely or fairly valuable and 25% stating that it was of some value.

Discussion

Presenters responding to open text post conference survey questions about what additional support could be provided by the AES detailed the continued provision of IT/Technical information before the conference, in particular providing presenters with information about the anticipated availability of technology at the conference, software versions that can be supported and whether or not an IT Technician will be available on site to assist with any difficulties.

A presenters' kit may be developed containing guidelines for presenting, samples of good practice presentations and potentially, a webinar directed at presenters and aimed at improving presentation quality. The benefit of a webinar is that it can be uploaded to YouTube and replayed at the convenience of presenters or other interested parties. A further suggestion was to review and localise the presenter guide used by the American Evaluation Association.

Several respondents suggested that presenters and conference organisers would benefit from the collection and sharing of feedback about their presentations (n=3). Not only would this provide participants' the opportunity to rate the presenters, it would also enable real time adjustment where further presentations are to be made. It would also provide organisers with an insight into areas of interest to participants, potentially aiding future planning. Should the decision be made to re-run some of the leading presentations later in the conference, this would be aided by participant ratings. It could support the awarding of the 'best presentation' award.

Other support requirements were for presenters to have onsite access to printing, a PowerPoint template for presentations, and presenter guidelines and tips.

Key Findings

Presenters valued the support provided by AES staff at the conference.

There were some gaps in information provided to presenters before the conference in relation to available technology, onsite support and software specifications.

3.2 Exhibitors and Sponsors

Overview

A short survey was distributed to exhibitors and sponsors during the conference, with a total of five responses completed by three exhibitors, one sponsor and one respondent that was both a sponsor and exhibitor.

Respondents noted that the major value of conference attendance was the opportunity to connect with participants, expose products to the evaluation sector, renew contacts and get direct feedback about products.

Survey respondents had clear direction from the AES in relation to their respective roles and exhibits. Four respondents intended to be involved in the 2015 conference. It was felt that continued involvement would help people to recognise their brand, with a larger participant number expected in Melbourne in 2015 relative to Darwin 2014. One respondent that did not intend to be involved in the 2015 conference was a Darwin-based agency.

Discussion

Respondents to the exhibitor and sponsor survey suggested that adequate room be provided to showcase products and erect banners. Respondents also sought the space to be accessible and visible to participants, preferably in the same location as meal breaks (morning and afternoon teas) to facilitate traffic thoroughfare.

Key Finding

Exhibitors and sponsors felt that there was value in participating in the AES conference, in particular making connections in the evaluation sector and receiving feedback about products.

3.3 Social media

Overview

The use of social media has been a consideration for the AES over recent conferences. Twitter and Facebook were used in Darwin to communicate with participants.

Note however that the full impact of social media cannot be assessed, given many readers of AES tweets, Facebook feeds or other communication releases were not themselves conference attendees. It is likely that some non-attendees followed the tweets, thereby learning from the conference without being present.

After the conference, participants were asked which social media options they used at the conference, through the post event attendee survey. The majority (60%, n=61)

stated that they did not use any social media platforms at all. Of those that did, 19 followed the Twitter feed and 15 tweeted about the conference themselves. A further 13 looked at the conference's Facebook page, 24 followed the daily emails from the AES, while two wrote or followed a relevant blog.

The survey also sought to gauge how useful social media had been for the purposes intended by the AES. Of 85 responses received, few participants felt that social media was 'very useful', with over a third generally feeling that social media was of little use. Results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 **PARTICIPANTS REASONS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA 2014**

	Very useful	Of some use	Not a great deal	Of no use
Finding out about program changes	17%	30%	22%	30%
Finding out about transport and other logistics	16%	27%	22%	35%
Sharing ideas and information about evaluation practice	12%	20%	28%	40%
Finding out about social aspects of the program (eg. dinners, markets)	16%	27%	23%	35%
General networking with other participants	17%	17%	29%	38%
Contributing feedback about the conference	12%	20%	30%	38%
Making the conference more accessible (e.g. IT voice recognition software)	12%	18%	27%	44%

Source: Post event attendee survey, 2014

Discussion

There is an opportunity for the AES to further define its purpose in supporting social media platforms. The broader impact of social media among participants and non-attendees may be considered and a specific content analysis may be useful in determining how it is currently used. In considering the future of social media, there is a need for social media platforms to be designed to meet participants' aspirations rather than being supply driven.

Key Findings

Social media activities did not appear to have a high level of impact among participants at the conference. It may have been useful for non-attending evaluators, though this was not assessed.

4 Organisation and logistics

4.1 Background to roles and responsibilities

The AES Board is ultimately responsible for the conference. It delegates responsibility for the management of the AES annual conference as below (AES, 2014b):

- The Board generally delegates to the Executive Officer the responsibility for managing the annual conference to achieve its delivery, quality and financial objectives. Hence the Executive Officer has been delegated the authority to make decisions as they affect delivery, quality and financials.
- All financial commitments, major supplier contracts, including sponsorship agreements must be approved by two of the following: Executive Officer; President; Vice-President; and/or Treasurer.
- Providing they are consistent with the Board approved conference budget. Substantial variances (over 10%) to the original conference budget require Board approval.
- Members generally have no specific delegated authority, but do have responsibility for the content, quality and design of the conference program, social program and local engagement.

In practice, the AES Executive Officer works in close collaboration with a host city conference committee to manage the conference, with support provided by other AES committees and local AES members. The major roles and responsibilities for the conference are:

- *Conference Director*: the AES Executive Officer, who holds decision-making responsibility under delegation from the AES Board.
- *Regional Conference Convenor*: working with the Conference Director to lead the planning and delivery of the conference (based in the host city).
- *Program Chair*: responsible for establishing the pre-conference workshop and conference programs (based in the host city).

Local AES members and volunteers support the organisation and conduct of the conference.

The AES' documentation outlining roles and responsibilities is detailed in full at Appendix B.

4.2 Analysis approach

Semi-structured interviews were a primary form of data collection to gather views regarding conference organisation and logistics. Interviews allowed respondents to provide open, yet confidential, feedback regarding their experiences. In prior years, a post-event conference convenors' report was prepared, providing rich data regarding lessons learned. This has not yet occurred following Darwin 2014 but is anticipated in coming months.

This section therefore draws on findings from:

- Interviews with Darwin organisers: Regional Conference Convenor (pre- and post-event), Program Chair (pre-event), other local members (x3)
- Interviews with AES Board members: incoming President (during event), outgoing President (during event), Treasurer (during event)
- Interviews with the AES Executive Officer: Pre- and post-event
- Interviews with AES fellows: John Owen (during event)

Findings also draw on documents provided by the AES, including:

- the AES Annual Report for 2014 (AES, 2014a)
- roles and responsibilities (AES, 2014b).

While comments from interviews are not attributed to individuals, for ease of discussion, they are grouped by the following two categories:

- *Darwin event organisers*: Darwin-based staff involved in organising the conference.
- *AES representatives*: AES Board members, the AES Executive Officer and AES fellows.

The analysis of interviews focused on reviewing audio of each interview to draw out major themes in response to the key questions regarding organisation and logistics. Discussion focuses on elements that worked well and areas for future improvement. These are reflected in the sections that follow. Comments regarding the strategic alignment of the conference with the AES' broader goals are outlined in Chapter 5.

4.3 Context for Darwin 2014

Several contextual considerations are relevant to much of the feedback received in relation to the Darwin 2014 conference. The major factors are described below.

4.3.1 AES staffing changes

The financial year 2013-14 was a significantly challenging period for the AES, with several changes to its staff profile during the 12 months preceding the conference. The *AES Annual Report 2014* illustrates this challenge:

Our progress... was compromised by number of changes to key staff. We have had four Executive Officers over the last twelve months. Two of the Executive Officers resigned and one was an interim temporary appointment.... Such staffing changes in such a small organisation had a significant impact on our ability to progress with the *Business Plan 2013-16* and meet our financial targets. The events of the last 24 months have shown that we do not yet have the organisational infrastructure to operate as the Board had planned and much more work is needed to build the AES's organisational capability. Not surprisingly, much of our focus in the office and at the Board over the last 12 months has of necessity been on internal and administrative issues.

AES Annual Report (2014a)

As a result, Darwin organisers collaborated with four different Executive Officers throughout the course of planning the conference. A period of relative stability was achieved following the May 2014 appointment of the current AES Executive Officer, though there were many challenges associated with the changes in staff, particularly referenced in feedback from Darwin organisers.

4.3.2 AES financial circumstances

In part resulting from instability in the AES' staff profile in 2013-14, the AES was in a weaker financial position for the Darwin conference, relative to prior years. The Annual Report for 2014 noted that:

For the 2014 financial year the AES incurred a loss of \$59,479 compared to the budgeted loss of around \$14,000. The difference between actual and anticipated loss is largely due to the impact of unexpected HR matters and the costs of resolving these matters, including putting in place interim measures to ensure operational effectiveness.

AES Annual Report (2014a)

The remote Darwin location added a degree of uncertainty regarding the number of conference registrations, impacting on projected revenues.

The Darwin conference was the first to be managed entirely in-house by AES. This was a result of reviewing the financial results of the Adelaide conference held in 2012. Substantial profit margins of the conference were retained by the then event management agency – ARINEX. A proposal was prepared by the then AES Executive Officer and approved by the Board to manage conferences in house to retain the profits within AES with funding to employ additional expertise where needed.

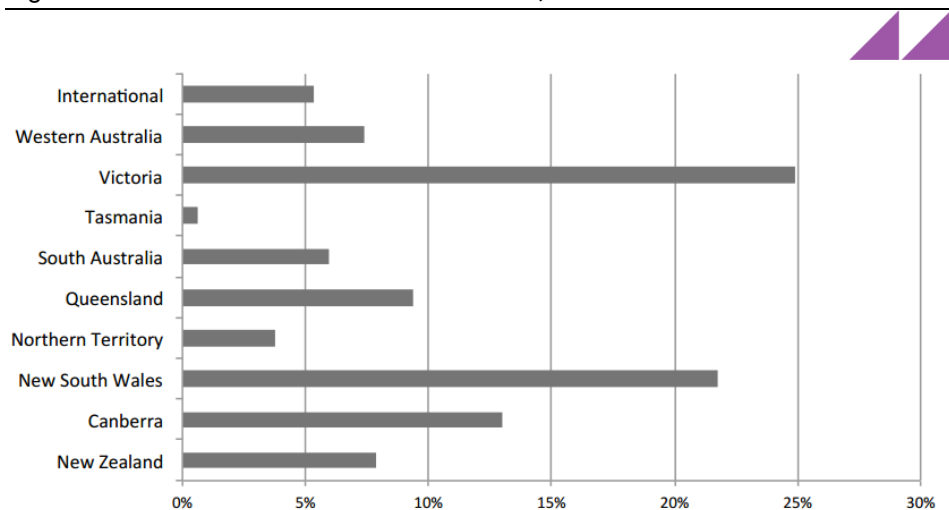
As ARINEX had already been engaged to plan the Brisbane conference at this time, the company was retained for this conference although there was a considerable downsizing of its responsibilities which were performed in-house by AES. This provided the confidence to AES that in-house management was possible.

Darwin was the first conference that was based entirely on in-house event management enabling retention of conference profits.

4.3.3 AES membership in Darwin

Darwin has one of the smallest AES membership bases, with only 4 per cent (approx. 36 people) of the AES' approximately 900 members. The relative proportions of AES members by jurisdiction are detailed in Figure 5. The task of organising the conference therefore drew heavily on Darwin's AES members.

Figure 5 **AES MEMBERSHIP BY REGION, 30 JUNE 2014**



Source: AES Annual Report 2014

Key Finding

Contextual factors impacted heavily on Darwin 2014, in particular changes to AES staff profile, AES budget deficits following financial year 2012-13, the choice not to contract professional event management support, and the relatively small AES membership base in Darwin.



4.4 Organisation of the conference

4.4.1 Overview

Sense of achievement

There was a palpable sense of achievement amongst the AES and Darwin organisers during the latter stages of the conference and in interviews conducted after its conclusion. There was a sense that the conference as a whole had been a resounding success, with many challenges being adequately planned for and addressed. After contributing significant effort over a long period of time, organisers valued the experience of hosting the event and welcoming people from across the evaluation community to Darwin.

Satisfaction and pride were taken in exceeding the expected number of attendees, providing an accommodating environment at CDU and supporting networking among participants. There was a feeling that the conference had helped to enhance the reputation of the AES, would likely generate significant profits and had proven that organising the conference without external event management contractors was not just possible, but also successful.

Breadth of involvement in organising and hosting

The success of the conference drew on the work of the core group of AES members that formed the conference organising committee. This predominantly comprised a small group of AES NT members.

The skill of the Executive Officer in event management was noted through interviews as a great positive in successfully delivering the conference. Despite taking on a large project management job during the event, the Executive Officer played a key role in assisting and supporting others during the five days of the conference.

A part time, temporary project officer was employed from February 2014. Unfortunately, due to prior commitments, the incumbent finished in early September one week prior to the conference. In the absence of this position, a project officer was employed one week prior to the conference for the final arrangements and to provide support at the conference. The project officer positions significantly to manage the organisational burden that would otherwise have fallen onto local organisers and volunteers.

Focus on Indigenous evaluation

Though Indigenous evaluation formed a major focus in Brisbane, the Darwin organisers sought to further enhance this focus, both by building the capacity for Indigenous evaluators to participate, but also by including activities to raise awareness among all evaluators of evaluation in Indigenous contexts. For example, the opening of the conference featured a Welcome to Country and a series of traditional dances by a Northern Territory Indigenous dance group.

The conference delivered on organisers' aims to support the education and training of Indigenous evaluators. Critical issues in the evaluation of programs targeted at Indigenous participants were also discussed extensively.

Key Findings

A wide range of volunteers from the AES network, in particular those based in the Northern Territory, were involved in supporting the successful planning and conduct of the conference. The Darwin 2014 conference resulted in a significant sense of achievement among people who were heavily involved in organising the event.

4.4.2 Challenges

Lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities

Despite the overall success of the conference, the Darwin 2014 conference was particularly challenging for organisers at times, with significant issues encountered throughout the year preceding the event. These challenges resulted, in large part, from the numerous changes in personnel at the AES, which impacted on decision-making and communication channels between Darwin organisers.

This finding was reflected through references made by interviewees to a degree of uncertainty regarding decisions that could be made locally in Darwin relative to those that needed to be referred to the AES Executive Officer for decision under delegation from the AES Board. Darwin organisers said that that felt somewhat stifled in their efforts to make simple planning decisions about the event to which they were dedicating their energies.

Tensions arose at various times between the Darwin organisers and some of the AES staff. These were particularly prominent when a newly appointed AES Executive Officer suggested that the conference might not be viable in 2014. While this concerned the Darwin organisers at the time, it galvanised them to prove they could deliver the conference and achieve a successful result. This situation prompted the AES Board to appoint a permanent Executive Officer. The incumbent provided a high degree of productive assistance to the organising committee.

Interviewees attributed some tensions to a lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities between the AES and Darwin organisers. This appears to be due to the upheavals and instability created by the AES staffing issues at the time prior to the engagement of the current Executive Officer resulting in inconsistent direction provided by the AES Board and staff and limited acknowledgement of the significant progress made by the core group of volunteers planning the conference. Many interviewees noted a lack of details about roles and responsibilities during the planning process, with much more granular detail required to guide the Darwin organisers about roles, responsibilities and timeframes for critical actions.

According to one Darwin organiser, there needed to be improved communication throughout the entire planning process. For example:

“There was a big lack of communication in the whole process... Communications processes have to be very very clear from the outset and they really need to develop good working communication relationships... Decision-making authorities need to be clearly outlined, and they also need to be honoured”.

Interview with Darwin organiser

In summary, interviewees sought improved information about roles and responsibilities in future, with clear communication between the AES and local organisers from the outset. Decision-making authority needs to be mutually understood at a granular level.

Heavy burden on Darwin organisers

The potential for significant conflict among volunteers should be acknowledged by the AES as a risk to the current conference organisation process. There was a sense among some interviews with Darwin organisers that a very large burden had been shouldered by a dedicated few. This demonstrates the risks associated with leaning too heavily on volunteers in locations such as Darwin where there are a limited number of AES members. As one Darwin organiser noted:

“Five per cent of the AES membership is in Darwin. So we’re talking [about] 20 to 25 members. It’s a very small number of people -- already over-extended, over-committed people.”

Interview with Darwin organiser

The expected role of organisers, particularly where support is not contracted to an events management provider, should be considered relative to the size, strength and resilience of the host community. While this comment is not intended to suggest that the Darwin AES community did not show resilience and perseverance, it does recognise the burden that falls onto volunteers from the evaluation community, who lead busy professional lives that can impact on their availability of time and ability to participate.

Role played by AES Board members

Perhaps partly as a result of the Board’s major focus being directed towards pressing organisational matters, there was a feeling among Darwin organisers that the intensity of involvement by AES Board members was somewhat inconsistent in preparing for the conference. There seemed to be some uncertainty about when and how Board members would be involved throughout the planning phase. One interviewee observed that despite the conference being a significant AES priority and major revenue generator, the responsibility for organising falls largely to the regional hosts, in collaboration with the AES Executive Officer, with limited structured Board involvement.

Further consideration is required about whether an appropriate role could be played by each Board member to support the conference planning process.

Annual rotation of the conference organisers

The rotation of the AES conference host city is accompanied by a revolving organising structure that relies upon the formation of a new conference organising committee each year. As detailed earlier, the conference organising responsibilities are a combined effort between the AES (largely the Board and Executive Officer) and a set of host city volunteers (Conference Convenor, Program Chair and local AES members).

While the rotating organising committee limits the host organisers’ role to a 12 month period, there are some major disadvantages to this model. Firstly, it limits the continuity of knowledge held by conference organisers over time, resulting in many of the lessons learned the previous year being re-learned the year after. It means that those involved in organising the conference have not played a role in prior conferences from an organiser perspective. Often, the host volunteers are evaluators, rather than event managers, with variable skills in critical project management and execution skills. It also means that those people who have been involved in prior conferences cease involvement at the conclusion of each conference, rather than remaining involved, potentially to address

some critical issues in key areas that would support future event organisers. The rotating conference organisation structure also fails to offer a formal role to AES Board members.

The rotation of the planning committee presents significant risks to the AES in issues recurring each year, with organisers focused only on finishing their event, rather than remedying issues, supporting future organisers or working to strategically to improve the delivery of the conference over a longer timeframe. With AES choosing (at least in Darwin 2014) to host the conference in-house to support revenue generation targets, organisational structures must be considered seriously to address the risk of host city volunteers being overburdened and failing to deliver a conference to expected standards.

Consideration should be given to alternate models for managing the organisation of the event. The AES may consider, for example, the optimal organisational structures to support the conference, potentially involving the formation of a standing AES Conference sub-committee with standing roles for AES Board members and rolling three-year terms for host city organisers (first year as an observer, second year as the conference host, third year as a mentor/advisor or strategic planner). This may ensure greater continuity and sharing of lessons learned from year-to-year.

Other challenges

Several relatively minor additional challenges were encountered as a result of the geographic distances between the AES in Melbourne and the hosts in Darwin. Some interviews emphasised:

- a limited understanding of the CDU conference layout by AES staff and Board members residing interstate, unnecessarily complicating logistical decision-making processes that could not be made unilaterally by Darwin organisers
- limited levels of face-to-face contact in the planning phase between the AES and Darwin organisers. This contributed to feelings of relative isolation in planning the event.

By contrast, Darwin organisers noted improved decision-making and an improved sense of shared understanding following the AES Executive Officer's visit to Darwin a week prior to the conference.

The only other notable comment regarding challenges encountered by Darwin organisers observed that there had been an absence of pro-formas and templates that could be used, requiring additional time to draft standard wording about the conference for letters and other logistical documentation. This may have partially resulted due to prior conferences being supported by Arinex, using standard tools and approaches that were no longer available to AES.

Key Findings

With the conference being organised in-house by the AES, rather than through contracted event management contractors, there was a lack of granular detail about the roles, responsibilities and decision-making authorities between the AES and Darwin organisers.

Darwin 2014 imposed a significant workload on volunteers, resulting in periods of conflict among Darwin organisers. The risks associated with leaning too heavily on volunteers should be acknowledged.

There was some uncertainty among Darwin organisers about the role of AES Board members in event planning activities.

The rotation of event organisers and host cities on an annual basis present a risk to the AES, with host city organisers' involvement limited to a 12 month term and a repeat need to build the event management capacity of host city organisers.

4.5 Logistics

4.5.1 Overview

Conference venue

As shown in the findings of the participant experience, the CDU venue at Casuarina was considered to be a major contributor to the success of the conference. While not being a purpose-built conference venue, it comfortably accommodated the participants in various small meeting rooms and the larger Mal Nairn auditorium. It provided a welcoming atmosphere and facilitated extensive networking throughout the day in its open meeting halls. The moveable plastic seats further promoted interaction between participants.

A further major benefit of the venue was that it was provided in kind by CDU, supporting the objective for the conference to generate revenue for the AES.

One minor challenge associated with the venue included the difficulty in navigating between different spaces, including lengthy (5 minute) walk between venues, making mid-session movements more difficult. This was exacerbated by the timetabling of sessions, with many sessions not aligned in relation to their duration.

Food and social activities

Major participant complaints regarding the Brisbane conference had centred on the quality of the food, along with the conference social events. In contrast, the food in Darwin provided a suite of suitable options for participants, catered by CDU's usual contracted caterers. The only complaints in relation to the food related to over catering and the environmental impact of disposable implements.

The Darwin organisers were determined to showcase Darwin through social events. The conference dinner was therefore held at one of Darwin's finest restaurants (PeeWee's). This exceeded the usual per head budget allocation for the conference dinner but provided catering to a memorable standard and showcased a prestigious venue to build the reputation of the evaluation field.

The social program included a visit to the Mindil Sunset Markets on Thursday night, with complementary bus transfers to Lee Point. This offered participants a taste of Darwin nightlife and a Darwin sunset over the sea.

Organisers and participants were very satisfied with these social events that added to the informal atmosphere and supported networking between attendees.

Key Findings

Similar to the findings of the participant experience, the conference venue was considered to be a major contributor to the success of the conference, both for participants and the AES, having been provided in-kind by CDU.

The conference food and social programs were important for showcasing Darwin and the AES.

4.5.2 Challenges

Accommodation

Given the location of the conference 9km north of Darwin city, accommodation recommended to participants was further north at Lee Point, approximately 17km outside central Darwin. As reported in the participant experience section, the accommodation was considered by many participants to be quite remote from Darwin city, which many people had not visited before. Some felt that the relatively remote accommodation limited the transport and food options. In any case, many participants were unable to book into the accommodation, which reached capacity prior to the event and was therefore unavailable to those making late bookings.

The geography of the accommodation created additional challenges for organisers who needed to arrange transport. Buses were provided to transport participants from Lee Point to the conference venue each of the five days of the pre-conference workshops and for the conference itself. Buses were not provided for participants staying in other locations, despite the Lee Point accommodation booking out, resulting in additional daily transport costs for many participants. Had the venue and accommodation been more centrally located, these logistical challenges may have been avoided.

From the Darwin organisers' perspective, many felt that they had little opportunity for involvement in accommodation selection decisions. Only one of the Darwin organisers had visited the accommodation prior to the event. Others regretted not doing so, feeling that the accommodation was not appropriate for all participants, including international keynotes.

Key Finding

The suggested conference accommodation resulted in logistical difficulties for the AES, with transport needing to be provided.

4.6 The conference program

4.6.1 Overview

Planning for the Darwin 2014 conference program commenced soon after the completion of the Brisbane 2013 conference. The format was much the same as the Brisbane conference, with a mix of plenary sessions and concurrent sessions.


The highlights of the program are listed below:

- the conference opening was a success, though its timing on the day before the sessions meant that some potential attendees had not yet arrived in Darwin.

- there were significant amounts of time for networking throughout the conference.
- the large number of sessions provided sufficient opportunity for presentations on a variety of topics of interest to participants, while providing opportunities for a variety of presenters.
- the lunchtime Wisdom Cafés were well received by participants based on their ability to link participants with senior evaluators for discussions about various topics of interest.
- the keynote speakers were commended by participants for their presentations and conference contributions, with most remaining at the conference throughout its duration, promoting participant interaction in the informal conference setting.
- advanced audio-visual and IT support was available throughout the conference, resulting in presentations that were loaded in advance and displayed successfully.
- the selection of a consistent MC for plenary sessions, entertaining the crowds and assisting the conference organisers to share information and rapidly progress through its agenda.

Key Finding

The conference program supported a balance of presentations and networking opportunities for participants.



4.6.2 Challenges

The presentation quantity vs quality trade-off

Building on feedback from participants as reported in the participant experience section, there is a need to strike a balance between the quantity and quality of presentations, with overly large numbers of presentations considered to be detrimental to the maintenance of the overall quality and reliability of sessions.

It is acknowledged that some participants are more likely to attend the conference if they are speaking. However, having too many presentations may diminish the overall event quality or result in some presentations having few participants in attendance due to participants being spread across multiple sessions.

The structure of analogous conferences may be illustrative for comparative purposes. A number of other conferences are compared with the AES conference in further detail in Appendix D. In summary, conferences vary in their structure, with some offering more keynote speakers and eminent panels, which all conference participants attend. Others focus on break-out sessions, providing a series of concurrent options for participants to choose.

The structure of several other conferences, relative to the AES is detailed below:

- *AES*: Plenary sessions plus concurrent sessions (up to seven at a time).
- *American Evaluation Association Conference*: variety of sessions, including demonstrations (workshops), plenary sessions and concurrent sessions (approx. 10 at a time)
- *Australian Market and Social Research Society*: pre-conference workshops, plenary sessions and break-out sessions (up to three concurrent)

— *Institute of Public Administration Australia national conference*: plenary sessions, break out panel sessions (up to four concurrent).

There is clearly no set formula. Some issues associated with poor quality presentations may be better managed through the abstract selection process or by collecting feedback regarding presentations year-on-year.

The AES profit motive appears to be best served by maintaining a large number of presentations to attract attendees. Should a reduction in presentations be desired, the number and quality of keynote speakers becomes more critical to promoting attendance. Under this scenario, options for broader interaction or participation must be encouraged, perhaps through World Café format presentations, break-out issues tables or other networking events.

Hard copy or online program

One major issue raised in Brisbane that again impacted on organisers and participants was that the conference program changed numerous times throughout the conference, resulting in a need to reshuffle sessions between different speakers and rooms. The advice following Brisbane suggested the need to move towards an online program that would allow changes to be reflected in real-time and accessed by participants via the internet (linked via iPhone, iPad or computer).

Should the format involving a large number of concurrent sessions be maintained in future, a balance will need to be struck between providing online programs to participants to aid their pre-event planning about sessions of interest, while avoiding the temptation to print a 'final' hard-copy version of the program, which inevitably changes as events need to be shifted.

From the organisers' perspective, there is a strong preference to move towards a wholly online program. This could be accomplished by only printing abstracts in the guidebook, maintaining session information in an available online format. This also supports presenters, with participants maintaining up-to-date information about programming decisions and presentation locations.

Conference theme and streams

The conference sought to drive a consolidated focus through selection of a conference theme ('unleashing the power of evaluation') and a range of presentation streams (as detailed in Chapter 1). The AES streams sought to offer a deeper level of greater guidance to those submitting abstracts.

There was a sense that the conference theme was very broad and open to interpretation by participants in many different ways. Some of the American Evaluation Association themes used in the past may provide more specific direction for the conference, with similar formats able to be considered by the AES in future:

- 2011: Values and Valuing
- 2010: Evaluation Quality
- 2009: Context and Evaluation
- 2008: Evaluation Policy and Evaluation Practice
- 2007: Evaluation and Learning
- 2006: The Consequences of Evaluation

In future, some consideration may be given to linking each stream to particular conference rooms to promote communities of knowledge. This will support participants seeking to develop their depth in particular areas.

Other programming challenges

Other issues that arose through interviews with organisers and the AES are detailed below:

- the template used for the conference schedule was the same one used for Brisbane, with set times for presentations. However, the call for abstracts offered different timeframes for presentations, resulting in gaps in various places throughout the program.
- there was no process in place to gauge feedback regarding each presentation, meaning that poor quality presenters were not provided with feedback or leading presenters identified.
- the selection of abstracts did not include peer review, impacting on the research credits able to be generated by academic speakers for attending.
- the sessions started early (8am) and finished late (5.30), accompanied by a series of evening events. This resulted in very long days, exacerbated for attendees arriving via late night flights, other time zones or international connections.
- limited transport to and from accommodation added difficulty for participants to relax and refresh where needed.
- the keynote plenary sessions were held at various times throughout the conference with some much better attended than others. Some were held first thing in the morning (8am) or as the final session on the day (4.30pm), potentially impacting on levels of attendance. The best attended plenary sessions were held during the mid-morning.
- the opportunity to engage keynote speakers in a more in-depth sessions or workshops with interested participants about the topic of their keynote addresses may also have been included in the program given their attendance throughout the conference, though only one keynote conducted a pre-conference workshop.
- the AES Annual General Meeting did not provide sufficient opportunity for AES members to provide feedback. One suggestion received through interviews was to have a facilitator or MC for the AGM to manage timeframes. It may be worthwhile providing an alternate conference forum/session for the AES Board members and leaders to discuss the work of the society and seek feedback directly from participants regarding the work of the Society.

Key Findings

The conference theme was very broad and open to interpretation rather than providing a highly targeted focus for the conference.

Various analogous conferences focus on attracting keynote speakers for plenary discussions or hosting eminent panel sessions rather than a large variety of concurrent sessions.

The program required frequent changes during the conference, with resultant changes to presentation schedules and rooms. This caused confusion among participants, who largely selected their desired sessions based on programs that were printed in advance.

5 Strategic alignment

5.1 Strategic objectives for Darwin 2014

The AES' vision is for 'quality evaluation that makes a difference', while its mission is 'to strengthen and promote evaluation practice, theory and use'. The conference does not have a set of publicised sub-objectives, so its goals seek largely to align with the AES overall mission.

The AES document outlining roles and responsibilities (see Appendix B) outlines four guiding principles for the conference (AES, 2014b):

- the conference is to be educative
- conference costs and fees should be kept as low as possible, and the conference should strive to achieve value for money for the participants
- the conference should be accessible to a wide range of participants
- the conference program must take account of the needs and professional interests of its current and potential members in both Australia and New Zealand, including members from, and activities within, Indigenous and other cultures. Publicity and other materials for the conference should reflect the Australian and New Zealand composition of the society and the Indigenous cultures of these countries.

While these provide a proxy set of sub-goals for the conference, they fail to capture many of the additional factors that are of critical importance to the AES in hosting the conference, relating to:

- the conference's profitability ambitions
- the brand and reputation benefits sought to improve the standing of the AES itself
- the ability to drive AES membership through conference attendance.

Therefore, in gauging whether the conference achieved its ambitions, thereby strategically aligning to the AES' objectives, the following goals are suggested for the purposes of evaluation:

- *Attendance*: the attendance levels relative to pre-event targets
- *Participation*: the breadth of participation in the conference across Australasia
- *Relevance*: whether participants furthered their learning by attending the conference
- *Profit*: whether the event minimised expenses and maximised its revenue
- *Reputation*: enhancing the evaluation field and the AES itself.

While these are discussed further below, the AES may give consideration to developing a specific program theory and associated targeted goals for the conference in future.

5.2 Did Darwin deliver on its objectives?

5.2.1 Attendance

Targets

No written targets were cited in relation to intended attendance rates or composition. Through pre-event interviews, Darwin organisers and AES representatives were hopeful of attracting 250 attendees to the conference. Desired attendance for pre-conference workshops were not discussed.

Actual attendance

Pre-conference workshops

A total of 55 registrations were received for full day pre-conference workshops, while 42 half day workshop registrations were also received. From this, the total number of registrations is unable to be calculated, due to the potential for double-counting. The number of registrations for pre-conference workshops is shown in Table 7.

Table 7 **PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOP REGISTRATION METRICS**

Registration category	Number of registrations
Pre-conference workshop (full day)	
Member	30
Student member	2
<i>AES member subtotal</i>	32
Non-member	20
Student non-member	2
<i>AES non-member subtotal</i>	22
Pre-conference workshop (half day)	
Member	24
Non-member	15
<i>AES member subtotal</i>	39
Student member	1
Student non-member	2
<i>AES non-member subtotal</i>	3

Source: Based on registration information provided by the AES, 2014

Conference attendance

A total of 327 people registered to attend the conference. This included 154 AES members (47.1 per cent), 116 non-members (35.5 per cent), 19 students (5.8 per cent) and 38 complimentary registrations (11.6 per cent). A number of the students and complimentary attendees may also have been AES members, though this is not clear from the data provided. It is unclear also whether some people registered for both full and half day conference attendance, which would result in double-counting. We have made the assumption that this did not occur.

The number of conference registrations is outlined in Table 8.

Table 8 **CONFERENCE REGISTRATION METRICS**

Registration category	Number of registrations
Conference	
AES member full registration	142
AES member: full day registration	10
AES member: half day registration	2
AES Member subtotal	154
AES non-member full registration	95
AES non-member: full day registration	18
AES non-member: half day registration	3
AES non-member subtotal	116
Student full registrations	19
Student full registrations	19
Complimentary registrations	38
Complimentary registrations	38
TOTAL	327

Source: Based on registration information provided by the AES, 2014

Evaluation of performance

The workshops observed by evaluators were relatively well attended, with 10-15 people in each. A number of workshops were held concurrently, suggesting that a minimum of 30 people attended each day of the pre-conference workshops. Given the remoteness of the Darwin conference location, it is unclear whether people were more inclined to attend pre-conference workshops (due to difficulty reaching Darwin and a desire to maximise the value of travel) or less likely to attend (due to additional expense in addition to reaching an already expensive flight destination). As such, the result appears adequate.

Relative to the stated target of 250 participants, the attendance total of 327 attendees may be considered to have exceeded expectations by 74 persons. This was considered a good result by the AES representatives and Darwin organisers, who were very satisfied with the level of attendance achieved.

5.2.2 Participation

Being an Australasian organisation, it is important to ensure that AES conferences support the evaluative needs and professional interests across a broad geographical area. By engaging with relevant sectors that are focused on evaluation, the AES can engage a range of cohorts and maximise conference participation.

The 2014 post conference survey showed a broad range of participants across Australasia and across sectors as shown in Table 9.

Table 9 **AES 2014 CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION BY LOCATION AND SECTOR**

Jurisdiction and work sector	# participants
Aotearoa / New Zealand	11
Community sector / not for profit organisation	2
Government - National/Central	3
Other	2
Private sector / consultancy	3
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	1
Australia ACT	13
Government - National/Central	8
Government State/Local	1
Other	1
Private sector / consultancy	2
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	1
Australia NSW	18
Community sector / not for profit organisation	6
Government State/Local	3
Private sector / consultancy	4
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	5
Australia NT	12
Community sector / not for profit organisation	6
Government - National/Central	1
Government State/Local	3
Private sector / consultancy	1
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	1
Australia QLD	3
Community sector / not for profit organisation	1
Private sector / consultancy	2
Australia SA	3
Government State/Local	1
Other	1
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	1
Australia VIC	26
Community sector / not for profit organisation	7
Government State/Local	3

Jurisdiction and work sector	# participants
Private sector / consultancy	9
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	7
Australia WA	7
Community sector / not for profit organisation	1
Government State/Local	2
Private sector / consultancy	2
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	2
Other Australasia (e.g. Papua New Guinea, Pacific Islands)	2
Community sector / not for profit organisation	1
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	1
Indonesia	1
Private sector / consultancy	1
Philippines	1
Government - National/Central	1
United States of America	3
Government - National/Central	1
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	1
Community sector / not for profit organisation	1
United Kingdom	2
Private sector / consultancy	2
Total	99

Note: there were 8 non-respondents (2 to jurisdiction and 6 to sector)

Source: Post conference attendee survey 2014.

Event participants also included a diversity of expertise in evaluation, indicating that the conference is attracting a broad range of participants by background. Table 10 shows the participant levels of expertise by sector.

Table 10 **AES 2014 PARTICIPANTS' LEVEL OF EVALUATION EXPERIENCE**

Main role	Advanced	Expert	Intermediate	Novice
Community sector / not for profit organisation	5		15	4
Government - National/Central	4	4	6	
Government - State/Local	6		5	2
Private sector / consultancy	13	5	6	
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	5	3	7	4
Other	1	4	0	0

Source: Post conference attendee survey 2014.

Evaluation of performance

Although the post-conference attendee survey 2014 responses represent less than a third of conference attendees, they indicate the breadth of participation at the conference. A range of geographical, expertise and sector level participants attended and therefore, the AES can consider that it is achieving broad reach of participants at the conference.

In planning for this evaluation, several AES Board members noted their interest in gauging the needs, engagement and participation of Indigenous peoples from across Australasia. Specific questions about ethnicity were added to the post conference surveys to enable cross tabulations with questions about professional interests, expectations, value and satisfaction. However, the response rate was too small to support meaningful analysis. This is another area that could benefit from further work to more fully assess the breadth of participation.

5.2.3 Relevance

Similar to previous years, the majority of conference participants cited professional development activities as their main reason for attending the conference. This incorporates networking, learning and sharing ideas and experiences. Although 78% of post conference survey respondents said they valued the networking opportunities at the conference and 64% valued the learning opportunities, a large proportion of participants surveyed during and post conference said they would like more practical, 'how to' mini workshops throughout the conference to enhance their skills.

Evaluation of performance

In response to the extent in which the conference provided professional learning, of the 102 respondents to the post event attendee survey, 16% said that the conference did not provide any further understanding about new research/evaluation approaches, 20% did not get any new understanding of the value and use of evaluation methods and 21% did not gain any research and evaluation skills from the conference.

However, the majority of participants responding to surveys noted their satisfaction and perceived value with the professional development opportunities gained through the conference. However, as indicated in the post event attendee survey, there is considerable room for improvement. This could be achieved by assessing the structure of sessions to potentially include more practical sessions targeted at specific skill levels of participants and defining and embedding principles of adult learning within the conference as discussed in the participant experience section.

5.2.4 Profit

The AES' revenue generation goals need to be balanced against its other stated goal to keep conference costs and fees as low as possible in order to achieve value for money for the participants (as outlined earlier).

Major expenses and revenue

The AES Board made a decision that in order to preserve more conference revenue, many of the conference management services be moved in-house rather than contracted to an external events management agency. Along with in-kind sponsorship where CDU provided the conference venue, in-house management reduced the risk of

running the conference in a smaller market and resulted in returning a greater than expected surplus.

The board passed a budget based on paid attendance of 275 delegates with a surplus of \$75K. The actual result was closer to 300 paid delegates with a surplus of \$109K

This was minimally offset by the need to provide additional buses for participants, *although the savings far exceed the additional costs incurred*. Maximising value for money for participants

The goal of minimising costs to participants saw the Darwin 2014 conference fees remain the same as they were at Brisbane 2013, with a maximum cost for members of \$999. Non-members incurred slightly higher fees, but could restrict costs to \$999 through making early-bird bookings.

A snapshot of the relative affordability of the AES conference can be made by comparing it to other analogous conferences, as shown below.

Table 11 CONFERENCE REGISTRATION COST COMPARISONS

Australasian Evaluation Society Conference	American Evaluation Association (AEA) Conference	Australian Market & Social Research Society (AMSRS) Annual Conference	Institute of Public Administration Australia (IPAA) International Conference
<p>Members</p> <p>Conference - \$840-999 Full day workshop - \$425-495 Half-day workshop - \$255-295</p> <p>Non-members</p> <p>Conference - \$999-1140 Full day workshop - \$495-565 Half-day workshop - \$295-340</p> <p>Students</p> <p>Conference - \$455-495</p>	<p>Members</p> <p>Conference - US\$205-300 Workshops - up to \$360</p> <p>Non-members</p> <p>Conference - US\$290-385 Workshops - up to \$480</p> <p>Full-time students</p> <p>Conference - US\$205-300 Workshops - up to \$200</p>	<p>Members</p> <p>Conference: \$1,420 (early) - \$1,750 Single day: \$700-850</p> <p>Non-members</p> <p>Conference plus associate m'ship: \$1,750 - \$1,950 Single day: \$850-1,050</p> <p>Gala dinner</p> <p>Flat rate of \$220</p>	<p>Members</p> <p>Individual member \$900-1,200 Corporate member \$1,100-1,400 Day registration (indiv): \$500-650 Day registration (corp): \$600-750</p> <p>Non-members</p> <p>Conference: \$1,400-1,700 Day registration: \$750-900</p>

Source: AEA: <http://www.eval.org/evaluation2014>; AMSRS: <http://www.amsrs.com.au/>; IPAA: <http://www.ipaa2014.org.au/>

Evaluation of performance

While minimising expenses, revenue generation was improved due to attendance rates that exceeded expectations. There is potential that the Darwin 2014 conference exceeded Brisbane's 2013 profit of \$103,619, though this may not be clear until the 2015 Annual Report is released. Additional value may have been realised if some of the non-members that attended the Darwin conference later became AES members, or lapsing members re-joined the AES. An assessment of membership flow-through from the conference was not part of the evaluation scope.

The table above demonstrates that the AES conference remains cheaper than other Australian conferences, but much more expensive than the American Evaluation Association conference. It is acknowledged however that the AEA conference does not include food and attracts upward of 2,000 attendees annually, enabling it to minimise costs. Participants' views regarding value for money were not in the evaluation scope.

5.2.5 Reputation

Enhancing the reputation of AES as the peak body for evaluation in Australasia is a sub goal of the annual conferences. Although there is no predetermined metrics to measure this aspect, participant experience is indicative of how attendees perceive the AES.

Several responses to participant data collection activities noted the value they obtained from gaining further information about the AES and its activities. These were framed in a

positive light indicating satisfaction with the organisation. Although only a small number of respondent noted the AES specifically, the general satisfaction rates of conference attendees was substantial at 85% of respondents being either satisfied or highly satisfied with the conference experience overall. This is a 7% increase in satisfaction levels from the 2013 conference.

Evaluation of performance

The high satisfaction rates among survey respondents and the increase of those rates from the 2013 conference suggests that the reputation of the AES has been enhanced through the positive experience of attendees.

The development of an action plan to devise strategies that address participant concerns, as indicated in the evaluation findings of the participant experience, may further enhance the reputation of AES. This action will provide a sound process for incorporating participant feedback and effectively working towards addressing the needs of the sector through valuing the participant voice.

Key Finding

The AES conference does not have a consolidated set of documented objectives, instead it seeks to support the broader AES goals.

In relation to a set of suggested goals defined for the evaluation:

- **attendance** exceeded targets, with over 300 registered participants
- **participation** at the conference was broad, with attendees from a variety of locations, sectors and levels of prior evaluation expertise
- **relevance** of the conference was supported by a balance of networking and sessions
- **profit** goals are expected to be exceeded, though final results are not known as yet
- **reputation** of the AES and the evaluation field were enhanced.

5.3 Consolidated evaluation findings

The box below consolidates all report findings.

Consolidated Findings

Chapter 3 - The participant experience

The Darwin 2014 conference was considered a success by attendees, with improved post-event satisfaction ratings compared to Brisbane 2013, Adelaide 2012 and Sydney 2011.

A major motivation for participants to attend Darwin 2014 was to pursue professional learning opportunities, to network with others in the evaluation field and to exchange knowledge. Some participants felt that they would have benefited from more practical workshops at the conference.

The majority of attendees were satisfied with the Darwin 2014 venue, citing its relaxed, outdoor environment as a contributor to the overall success of the conference. More broadly, it could be surmised that attendees value venues that support informality, sociability, interaction and inclusiveness.

The perceived remoteness of the accommodation and early session start times presented challenges for some participants.

The AES' goals to support evaluation in Indigenous contexts were met, though some participants also desire a focus on sessions relevant to their fields of work in international development and government.

Some participants noted the large number of concurrent sessions and short duration of many of those sessions causing difficulty in selecting and navigating session attendance.

While many presentations were well-received, some feedback noted variable quality among presenters. It was suggested that a presenter's kit needs to be prepared and that each session should be evaluated by attendees.

Variable levels of prior evaluation experience impacts on participants' abilities to engage in sessions. It was suggested that the program facilitate categorisation of sessions according to levels of pre-requisite knowledge required.

Presenters valued the support provided by AES staff at the conference.

There were some gaps in information provided to presenters before the conference in relation to available technology, onsite support and software specifications.

Exhibitors and sponsors felt that there was value in participating in the AES conference, in particular making connections in the evaluation sector and receiving feedback about products.

Social media activities did not appear to have a high level of impact among participants at the conference. It may have been useful for non-attending evaluators, though this was not assessed.

Chapter 4 - Organisation and logistics

Contextual factors impacted heavily on Darwin 2014, in particular changes to AES staff profile, AES budget deficits following financial year 2012-13, the choice not to contract professional event management support, and the relatively small AES membership base in Darwin.

A wide range of volunteers from the AES network, in particular those based in the Northern Territory, were involved in supporting the successful planning and conduct of the conference. The Darwin 2014 conference resulted in a significant sense of achievement among people who were heavily involved in organising the event.

With the conference being organised in-house by the AES, rather than through contracted event management contractors, there was a lack of granular detail about the roles, responsibilities and decision-making authorities between the AES and Darwin organisers.

Darwin 2014 imposed a significant workload on volunteers, resulting in periods of conflict among Darwin organisers. The risks associated with leaning too heavily on volunteers should be acknowledged.

There was some uncertainty among Darwin organisers about the role of AES Board members in event planning activities.

The rotation of event organisers and host cities on an annual basis present a risk to the AES, with host city organisers' involvement limited to a 12 month term and a repeat need to build the event management capacity of host city organisers.

Similar to the findings of the participant experience, the conference venue was considered to be a major contributor to the success of the conference, both for participants and the AES, having been provided in-kind by CDU.

The conference food and social programs were important for showcasing Darwin and the AES.

The suggested conference accommodation resulted in logistical difficulties for the AES, with transport needing to be provided.

The conference program supported a balance of presentations and networking opportunities for participants.

The conference theme was very broad and open to interpretation rather than providing a highly targeted focus for the conference.

Various analogous conferences focus on attracting keynote speakers for plenary discussions or hosting eminent panel sessions rather than a large variety of concurrent sessions.

The program required frequent changes during the conference, with resultant changes to presentation schedules and rooms. This caused confusion among participants, who largely selected their desired sessions based on programs that were printed in advance.

Chapter 5 - Strategic alignment

The AES conference does not have a consolidated set of documented objectives, instead seeking to support the broader AES goals.

In relation to a set of suggested goals defined for the evaluation:

- attendance exceeded targets, with over 300 registered participants
- participation at the conference was broad, with attendees from a variety of locations, sectors and levels of prior evaluation expertise
- relevance of the conference was supported by a balance of networking and sessions
- profit goals are expected to be exceeded, though final results are not known as yet
- reputation of the AES and the evaluation field were enhanced.

5.4 How could the conference be improved in future?

Most data sources used for the evaluation sought ideas regarding future conference enhancements. Significant depth of information is therefore available to support the identification of options to enhance the conference. The literature review of other

conference structures, formats and styles also provides additional relevant contextual information and comparison.

Information gathered from the various data collections used in this evaluation suggest that the AES could further consider:

- documenting the AES goals for the conference to support decision-making and future planning activities.
- the optimal delivery structures for future conferences, including:
 - › the roles, responsibilities, decision-making authority and communications between the host city organisers and the AES
 - › the benefits and fall-backs of continuing to rotate the conference on an eight year cycle, relative to the AES' goals for the conference
 - › the optimal organisational structures to support the conference, potentially involving the formation of a standing AES Conference sub-committee with standing roles for AES Board members and rolling three-year terms for host city organisers (first year as an observer, second year as the conference host, third year as a mentor/advisor or strategic planner)
 - › the level of representation and involvement in conference planning by AES Board members, and the role of the AES Executive Officer and other AES staff in leading the conference
 - › protocols, templates and plans to be prepared to hosts to aid delivery
 - › additional support required to attract sponsors/exhibitors of conference participants, or to transition conference attendees into AES members
- the conference programme, including:
 - › the number and length of papers, noting a preference among participants for fewer, longer discussions and interactive sessions
 - › whether to select a broad or specific conference theme
 - › whether the conference streams are required and if so, whether they could be aligned to particular rooms
 - › whether presentations could be marked with an additional field to note the target audience to enable participants to attend sessions based on their levels of prior exposure to evaluation theory (minimal, moderate or advanced)
 - › ways to maximise the involvement of keynote speakers, potentially by augmenting plenary presentations with follow-up workshops for more in-depth discussion about areas of expertise with advanced practitioners
 - › how the timing of sessions could be better aligned to avoid gaps in the program
 - › ways to maintain delegate awareness of changes to the program in real time, in particularly considering ways to avoid settling a version of the program in hard copy, which becomes rapidly outdated
 - › the potential for presenter guidelines to mandate high levels of interactivity with participants and provide a quality assurance foundation
 - › ability to use new-media to share a selection of key presentations online to non-attending AES members and others interested in evaluation, in order to showcase the conference and drive future attendance
 - › ways to ensure that presentations focus on innovation and new paradigms in evaluation

- › include more practical workshops in conference schedule
- maximising enjoyment and sense of conference value among participants:
 - › ensuring that the conference remains authentic to place through the consideration of factors that maximise informality, sociability, interaction and inclusiveness
 - › establishing centralised and easily accessible accommodation and transport options to enhance the delegate experience
 - › providing a centralised location for sponsors and exhibitors
 - › provide presenters with detailed information about technology availability before the conference
 - › define and embed the principles of adult learning throughout conference activities
 - › establish structured networking activities
 - › define the purpose of social media and design its use to maximise its aim
 - › establish timelines for dissemination of information before, during and after the conference.

5.5 Suggestions for future conference evaluation

This evaluation provides insights into the achievements and challenges in Darwin 2014. It is important that the conference continue to be evaluated in future to support continuous improvement.

It is suggested that the AES consider commencing the evaluation earlier in future to allow organisers' feedback to be gathered during the conference planning process, in turn aiding the generation of formative findings and supporting real-time resolution of issues.

Future AES conference evaluations may consider:

- developing a coherent program theory with an associated monitoring and evaluation framework for the conference as a whole, acknowledging that the 2014 evaluation was conducted rapidly without time to undertake detailed preparation for data collection activities
- producing and implementing a variety of tools to gauge participants' views regarding each session of the conference attended
- developing a standardised risk register template for organisers to document their observations, arising risks and areas for improvement during the conference planning phase or after the event. This will potentially provide valuable evaluative data in real-time
- undertaking longitudinal analysis of conference metrics, based on data available in previous years, and advising on future data collection to support longitudinal performance tracking. This may include, for example: participant numbers; primary residential location; demographic information; AES member and non-member attendance; various categories of entry; number of abstracts submitted/accepted; sponsorship and exhibitor information; or similar information.
- considering how the AES can maximise its conference revenues while minimising its expenses, thereby improving the potential for cost reduction for participants in future, potentially growing its overall attendance, boosting membership or offering scholarships for groups that would not otherwise be able to attend.

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Part Three

APPENDICES

III

Appendix A Brisbane convenor's post event report: summary of findings

Findings

The convenor's post-event report reflected many findings that emerged through the organisation process. These are detailed below.

Planning the feel, values and outcomes

- Helpful to establish shared vision from the outset
- Goals were to be inclusive, interactive, innovative, challenging and invigorating
- Aim for \$30,000 profit for the AES
- To grow AES membership in Queensland

Assignment of roles

- Established conference organising committee and program, Indigenous reference, marketing, and social sub-committees
- There was a sense that the AES Executive Officer and Board were finding their way in organising the conference, though major decisions were made by the EO rather than Brisbane organisers:

Choice of venue

- There were additional costs associated with the selection of the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre
- Pre-conference workshops were held at an alternate site offering greater flexibility and more economical options

Conference organisers

- Arinex was appointed to organise the conference, after being used for the Adelaide and Sydney conferences.

Keynote speakers and conference themes

- Speakers were sought based on their records as engaging presenters, as well as having an innovative content base that would challenge the audience.

Proposals

- Difficulties were encountered getting the provisional program online prior to early-bird registrations closed
- Over 200 proposals were submitted. This requires a large bank of reviewers.

Program

- The development of the pre-conference workshop and conference program was a large job for the program chair.
- The pre-conference workshops were also arranged by the Brisbane conference organisers, addition to the preparation role.

“The lack of clarity about the role of the Organising Committee and local members and the somewhat arbitrary nature of decision-making caused tension throughout the conference preparation.”

“it is really necessary to have the version on the AES website update daily”

- The program was printed three weeks in advance of the conference, but there were many changes after this time
- Costs for organisational activities were borne by the local organisers, including phone bills, international calls, printing, petrol and parking.

Materials

- Conference bags incurred an additional cost and required volunteer time to complete
- Printing abstracts separately reduced the costs associated with including them in the program.

Presenters and chairperson

- A guide to quality presentations was sent to presenters to make sure they were aware of expectations
- Chairs of sessions were responsible for monitoring times and avoiding overlaps.

At the conference

- An opportunity to review presentations was established through pom poms in jars.
- Complaints during the conference mostly related to the lack of variety of the food, particularly the biscuits for morning and afternoon teas

It was difficult to get people to pay attention and to hear about things that were new and to follow instructions

At the pre-conference workshops

- Volunteers' roles were not entirely clear
- Other challenges included the bushland setting of the workshops.

Suggestions

The report detailed several suggestions for future conferences. The major reflections for consideration by the AES and Darwin's organisers are detailed below.

Shared vision

- Engage the local members and supporters by facilitating a session that establishes the local vision for the conference – their criteria for success. Consider the longer term benefit to AES in this region – how the conference can leverage capacity building.

Role of local committee

- Harness the enthusiasm and capability of regional members and supporters with shared decision making and joint responsibility, recognising and respecting their capacity, interests and talents.
- Keep registration costs as low as possible to enable individuals to pay for their own registrations and to encourage a wider spread of participants.
- Keep costs down with frugal budgeting, putting expenses where they will give best value for money and manage risks.
- Invite an Indigenous voice into all aspects of the conference, if not available for the committee then through advisors providing comment.

Setting the schedule of dates

- Allow time from the call for papers closing (with extensions) to the early-bird registration cut-off, so that the program can be developed and selected presenters can be confirmed. Consider making this a little later than previously, noting that promoting the conference close to the end of the financial year also has merit.

Call for papers

- Rewrite the criteria for assessment of proposals.
- Combine the abstract and justification statements.
- Require a short bio of the primary presenter which is also provided to the reviewers.
- Ask more questions about the presentation e.g. whether it has been delivered previously at an AES event or other conference.
- Ask applicants to nominate the strand and key words or this could be done in conjunction with the letter advising them they have been selected. Note that the program chair may decide to place the presentation in a different strand.
- Provide a mini-style guide and request applicants follow it for their submissions. This will reduce retyping and editing.
- Advise speakers that participants will rate each session (if this is decided).
- Advise applicants they will be required to submit their PowerPoint presentation at a given date before the conference to enable it to be organised by the audio-visual technicians (if this is decided).
- Consider allowing posters to be looped PowerPoint presentations as these are easier for participants to produce.

Registration system for proposals

- Think through the purposes that the information will be used for. Make sure the system is easy to access by the applicants, reviewers and the program committee. It needs to have the capacity to download all proposals by all fields into one spreadsheet so it is easy for the program committee to sort and search in a variety of ways.
- As much as possible, automate reports to the program committee, such as outstanding reviews; outstanding acceptances; and correspondence to applicants and reviewers.
- The system also creates the program and organises the IT schedule during the conference so that updates in one place are carried through.

Membership registration system

- Make sure it can accommodate all the variations in registrations.
- Consider all uses of the system in terms of its capability, such as producing nametags, reports to the committee to see where registrations are low, and marketing needs to be increased.

Once papers have been selected

- Give presenters an opportunity to edit their abstracts for publication. Reinforce the use of the style guide.
- Keep the door open for those unsuccessful as they may be needed when others drop out.

Program

- Keep some flexible times on the program to allow for delegate generated topics. Consider having a timeslot when there are no presentations, and all sessions are facilitated for delegate interaction on emerging topics.
- Allow time and space for keynote speakers to engage with participants.
- Shift the focus towards the online program to have more flexibility and the capacity to notify of last minute changes. While having some printed programs, seek to reduce printing costs. This will require changing the arrangements with sponsors so they have more visibility over a longer period electronically.
- Schedule the response to the Welcome to Country and confirm who will lead it.
- Make sure there is plenty of signage.
- Check in with keynote speakers within the last month prior to the conference to discuss their presentation and see that they are working towards the conference theme.

Logistics

- If a venue is out of the city and public transport is not easily managed at the right time, hire a bus to come and go at a set time.

Appendix B Roles and responsibilities

This Appendix quotes the AES' Roles and Responsibilities document, agreed for the 2014 conference.

Background

The management of AES conferences is generally delegated by the Board to the Executive Officer (EO), who works in collaboration with a local conference committee and with the support of all AES committees and working groups.

This document outlines the objectives, procedures, roles and responsibilities of managing AES conferences based on previous experience.

Preamble

The conference represents the major annual event for the AES. The expectations of delivering the conference are threefold:

1. It achieves the objectives of the conference (see below)
2. It contributes to the income of the AES (as budgeted)
3. It is managed and coordinated across AES structures to ensure broad based and balanced involvement as well as mitigation of risk.

The annual conference is guided by the following principles:

4. The conference is to be educative
5. Conference costs and fees should be kept as low as possible, and the conference should strive to achieve value for money for the participants
6. The conference should be accessible to a wide range of participants
7. The conference program must take account of the needs and professional interests of its current and potential members in both Australia and New Zealand, including members from, and activities within, Indigenous and other cultures. Publicity and other materials for the conference should reflect the Australian and New Zealand composition of the society and the Indigenous cultures of these countries.

AES guiding values and principles

All AES members are bound by the AES Code of Ethical Conduct and further to these all members volunteering to participate in activities of the AES are expected to respect the following:

- That the AES is the business of all members
- To work collaboratively within the AES governance structure and guidelines
- To respect each other's roles and consequent responsibilities
- To focus on activity that supports the strategic priorities and operational imperatives of the AES
- To protect the reputation, assets and resources of the AES.

Governance

The responsibility for the direction and management of the AES rests both in statutory and fiduciary terms with the AES Board. The AES Board has the ability to delegate these

responsibilities as it sees fit. The AES Board delegations in regards to the management of the AES annual conference are outlined below:

- The Board generally participants to the EO the responsibility for managing the annual conference to achieve its delivery, quality and financial objectives. Hence the EO has been delegated the authority to make decisions as they affect delivery, quality and financials.
- All financial commitments, major supplier contracts, including sponsorship agreements must be approved by two of the following; Executive Officer, President, Vice-President and/or Treasurer;
- providing they are consistent with the Board approved conference budget. Substantial variances (over 10%) to the original conference budget will require Board approval.
- Members generally have no specific delegated authority, but do have responsibility for the content, quality and design of the conference program, social program and local engagement.

Management and Coordination

The EO in collaboration with the Regional Conference Convenor (CC) are responsible for production of a quality AES conference within the budget, project plan and strategic alignment (theme) parameters as established with the Board.

The EO is the conference project manager. Further to the above this includes responsibility for, but not limited to:

- Finance
- Marketing/communications/promotions/branding/sponsorships
- Logistics and Operations
- Delegate and Presenter management
- Conference Program and Content
- Successful delivery

The AES office will support the conference, through the assignment of a project coordinator role. This role will be responsible for coordinating the operations of the conference as directed by the EO.

Specifically this includes:

- Establishing meetings schedules for conference business
- Taking and circulating minutes and action notes from meetings
- Drafting a project plan for consideration and reporting on progress against milestones
- Venue liaison and coordination of delivery
- Overseeing registration and program information on the website and
- Customer service, presenter communications and servicing sponsorship entitlements

The Membership and Communications Manager will also provide marketing, social media, participant materials, collateral development and other support as required to the conference.

The following services should be engaged by the AES Office:

- Website designer

- Events management system (as appropriate)
- Printers
- Media services (as appropriate)

The EO and the team works in consultation and collaboration with the AES committees and working groups and regional members.

The regional members from where the conference is being held will form a Conference Management Team. (CMT) The regional CMT has two primary responsibilities:

1. for the design and content of the conference program, (within the parameters of the budget and approved theme) and
2. to work collaboratively with the AES Office to deliver the conference on time, within budget and to the expected quality levels.

The regional CMT is specifically responsible for:

- The conference program including;
 - a) Developing a conference theme
 - b) Suggesting appropriate keynote speakers (that can address the theme)
 - c) 'Design' of the conference program
- Support development of the pre-conference workshops program
- Engaging local AES members and evaluation sector involvement (especially in regards to sponsorship and support)
- Providing advice and support to the EO with a particular focus on local needs, opportunities and challenges.

In respect to the conference program items a, b and c above, the EO will communicate the final proposal to the Board for endorsement (in-session or out-of-session) to ensure consistency with the AES corporate image and professional direction.

The EO is responsible for regular communication and reporting to the Board on progress against the project plan and budget which is done in collaboration with the regional conference convenor.

Reporting requirements will be the responsibility of the EO and should include as a minimum:

- Update against project plan
- Expenditure report against budget (and any major budget variations)
- Any issues for discussion

The Pleasure and Pain of Volunteering

It is intended that this breakdown of roles and responsibilities offers appropriate, realistic and achievable responsibilities for local committee members. Participation of members for such a critical professional event is valued and appreciated. Members also need to consider the demand on their time to ensure they can deliver time effective and quality driven outcomes.

There is great satisfaction in working on the conference and seeing ideas and visions evolve and emerge, the uniqueness and flavour of the annual conference is a reflection of the dedicated and diligent involvement of the local members.

There are many critical functions needed to deliver a quality conference experience, but there are some that are particularly important and dependent on member's involvement, these include.

Key functions and responsibilities

Table B1 details major responsibilities for organisation in relation to the conference.

Table B1 **RESPONSIBILITIES FOR ORGANISATION**

Responsibility	Description
Overall leadership	This is the responsibility of the AES – EO and Conference Convenor ² once Board endorsement concerning the conference budget, theme and keynote speakers is obtained.
Financials	The EO has the responsibility to enact prudent, monitoring and management of the financial aspects. (after Board endorsement of the conference budget and with support from the Treasurer)
Secretarial support	The AES Office or delegate is responsible for ensuring meetings are organised with agendas, minutes, correspondence etc. , and be responsible for all enquiries and correspondence related to the conference.
Pre-Conference Workshops Program	Will be coordinated by the EO or delegate who will work with the Program Convenor and the Professional Learning Committee. Input will be sought from the AES Fellows, and the Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and committees as required. The EO or delegate will work closely with the Regional Conference Committee to finalise the program.
Conference program coordination and design	This is the primary responsibility of the Regional Conference Committee. It requires a small team of 4/5 people available from late March to May to process the assessment of proposals and design the detailed conference program. The AES office will provide the support systems and the Professional Learning Committee and the 2013 Conference and Program Convenors will be available to advise ³ .
Marketing and Sponsorship	Developing the marketing/sponsorship strategy will be the primary responsibility of the Regional Conference Convenor and the EO, in conjunction with the conference development team. This group will work collaboratively to develop the sponsorship packages and prospectus. Delivery of the marketing plan will be the responsibility of the Communications Manager while support for the sponsorship proposals will be provided by the AES office.
Coordination of the Social Program	This is the responsibility of the regional conference program committee. It is best developed at the time of developing the conference program. A small group should be ready to present a proposal of ideas to the Program Convenor. The program should take advantage of local attractions, offer opportunities for all types and nature of member/participant and include AES 'business' events such as the AGM, Board meeting, committee and SIG meetings, leaders forum other topics. Involvement should be sought from AES committees.
Conference evaluation report	PLC to review draft conference report. EO to sign off conference evaluation reports. ⁴
Conference fees	Board signs off on any increase in conference fees.

²This is in line with the Brisbane conference organisation. See 01 September 2012 Minutes: Conference Venue. E.g. Conference venue: ME reported on a decision to change the venue for the 2013 Brisbane conference. Decision was made with the conference organising committee.

³ This is in line with the Brisbane conference. See 'Keynote speakers' (01 Sept 2012 Minutes)

⁴ This is in line with 24-25 November Board meeting

Comments from the 2013 Conference Convenor

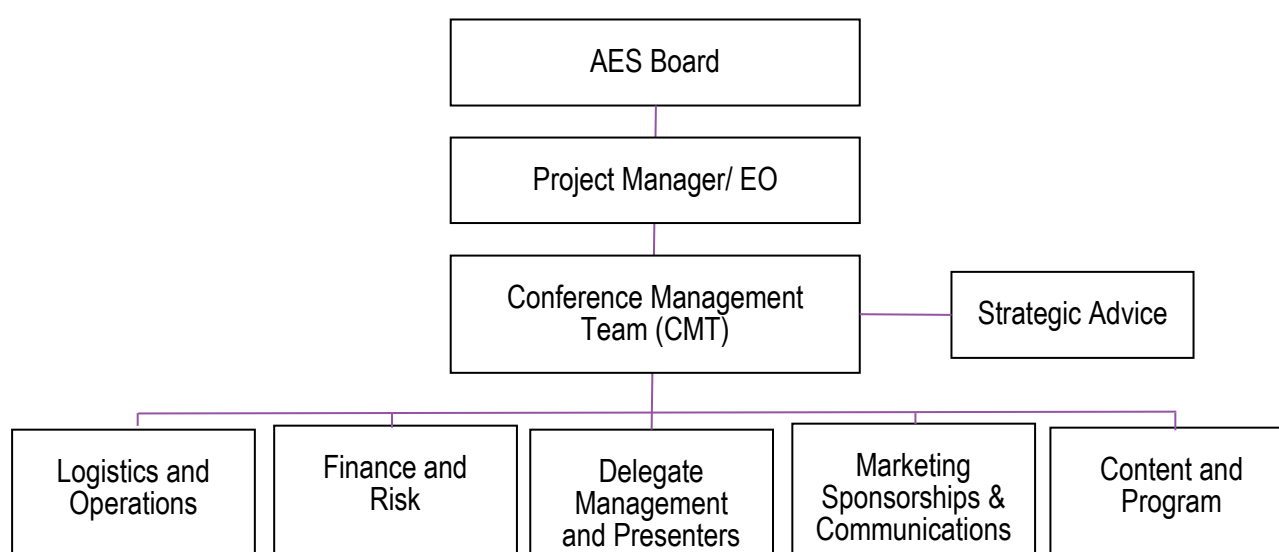
Collaboration between the AES office and the regional conference team is essential for a successful AES conference. The conference is an opportunity for the AES office staff to contribute to the AES objectives.

The role of the EO is to ensure the financial and professional outcomes of the conference and pre-conference workshop program for the strategic benefit of the AES.

The regional conference organising committee is responsible for a well-planned conference that runs smoothly, has a program that attracts strong attendance through what it offers and is highly valued by attendees.

Typical Conference Operating and Delivery Model

Organisation Chart



Key Roles and Responsibilities

Project Manager – Has overall accountability to the AES Board for the delivery of the conference, with associated delegations and authorities as per the delegated authority of the EO position. This position will normally be undertaken by the EO of the AES and leads the CMT.

Strategic Advice – An advisory group established to provide strategic advice to the Conference Management Team. To include representatives from Indigenous, the AES membership and a Conference Mentor, plus others as determined appropriate. The group has no operational responsibilities.

Conference Management Team – Provides overall managerial oversight of the conference, the project plan, oversees the dissemination of internal/external communications, provides a conference spokesperson, forms recommendations, makes decisions, solves problems and manages risks. The Conference Convenor is a member of the CMT.

Logistics and Operations - Provides on the ground resources to the CMT and other project teams, develops and monitors the project plan, provides progress against the

project plan, arranges and books service providers, obtain quotes, liaises with vendors and suppliers, forms recommendations and solves problems. Liaises with the CMT.

Finance and Risk - Provides overall financial management services for the CMT. Establishes a conference budget, monitors actuals against expenditure, provides reports and financial analysis, is a member of the CMT.

Delegate Management and Presenters – Provides overall management of participants and presenters. Establishes a process to manage participants and presenters, liaises with the CMT.

Marketing Sponsorships & Communications – Develops the marketing/sponsorship strategy in conjunction with the conference management team. Liaises with the CMT.

Content and Program - Process the assessment and review of proposals and design the detailed conference program. Is a member of the CMT.

Notes

- This is a typical structure and should be reviewed by the CMT (once established) for relevance and appropriateness.
- Stream leads should be established in the operational functions where appropriate to provide reporting functions to the CMT
- The structure is designed to provide both a management function and an operational (doing) focus, with clear lines of communication and responsibility being established

Conference Convenor

The responsibilities of the Conference Convenor include, but not limited to working with the EO and the CMT to develop:

- the conference objective, title, themes, values of the conference, keynote speakers
- processes to gain input and feedback from AES committees and members
- identifying local venues and services that offer the best value for money
- advising on and developing conference collateral
- engaging volunteers to assist in conference planning and hosting.

Key Skills

- Project management and/or event/conference management experience
- Excellent communication
- Excellent interpersonal skills
- Attention to detail
- Liaison and stakeholder management
- Basic financial literacy

Attributes

- Outgoing, people orientated, personable
- Task orientated
- Has time available to fulfil the obligations of the role
- Team player
- Has a strong network.

Appendix C Data collection response samples

Participant face-to-face surveys

There were a total of 32 respondents to the participant face-to-face surveys undertaken at the conference. Of these, the majority were AES members (n=21) with eight respondents reporting that their level of expertise was beginner, ten intermediate and three identifying as experts. Similarly, of the 11 responding non AES members, two reported as being beginners, six intermediate and three experts.

Of the AES members, nine reported that they had not previously attended an AES conference, six had been to one conference, four to two previous conferences and the remainder had attended three or more. Seven respondents had attended the pre-conference workshops.

Almost half of the respondents were presenting at the conference and of these 2/3 were AES members. The majority of respondents presenting were from Australia (n=8), New Zealand (n=4), USA (n=1) and Vietnam (n=1). These were primarily from Government state/local (n=6) followed by Government national (n=5).

Three respondents identified as Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander. Of these respondents, two listed occupation as Government state/local and one in University/student.

An analysis of responses to the participant face-to-face survey content questions showed relatively little difference between the respondent demographics and overall responses. Subsequently, the responses have been triangulated with responses to other data collection methods used at the conference – written feedback and free range focus group data.

Post conference attendee survey

This survey was sent via Survey Monkey to all conference participants. 107 responses were received from the 303 invitations sent (35% response rate). Detailed responses are included in the relevant section of this report.

Post conference non-attendee survey

The post conference non-attendee survey was sent via Survey Monkey to all AES members inviting those that didn't attend the conference to complete. A total of 146 responses were received from 862 invitations. This equates to approximately 25% of AES members that didn't attend the conference therefore, care should be taken to be mindful of the sample size when interpreting findings.

Written responses

There were 146 responses to the collection of written feedback that took place on the second day of the conference at the closing plenary for the day. The responses do not include demographic information. This data was thematically analysed and combined with other data collections.

Free range session

The free range session was an impromptu opportunity to explore the ideas of participants in a small focus group setting. It came about due to the no-show of the facilitator advertised for the session. The opportunity was taken to use the session to ask participants for their views about future conferences for AES. There was no set format for this session, hence, coined free range as suggested by Prof. Jean King. There were approximately 15 people participating in the session.

Appendix D Comparison with other conferences

Part of the evaluation sought to better understand the various ways that other similar conferences are conducted. Table D1 compares the AES conference with a range of comparable conferences.

Findings

Major findings are that:

- other major social research and evaluation conferences also host workshops for deeper discussion of topics outside the main conference
- all conferences considered are run annually
- major conferences present revenue generation opportunities to organisers
- registration fees for the AES are cheaper than for other national conferences considered, but more expensive than the American Evaluation Association conference
- the AES is the only annual conference to have a rolling cycle of rotations across major state and territory centres. Other conference locations are selected strategically (for example, AMSRS rotates only between Sydney and Melbourne to capitalise on attendances)
- some conferences place added focus on plenary and panel sessions led by a guest speaker or speakers
- each conference has concurrent or break-out sessions, though other Australian conferences considered had a maximum of three or four sessions in parallel, whereas the AES had up to seven. It is understood the AEA has over 10, but the full 2014 program was no longer available for review.

Table D1 **COMPARABLE CONFERENCES: AES, AEA, AMSRS & IPAA**

Conference	Frequency and duration	Participation	Registration cost and details	Location	Session formats used
Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) Conference	Annual, 5 days (including 2 days pre-conference workshops)	Approx. 250-750	Members Conference - \$840-999 Full day workshop - \$425-495 Half-day workshop - \$255-295 Non-members Conference - \$999-1140 Full day workshop - \$495-565 Half-day workshop - \$295-340 Students Conference - \$455-495	Rotation basis between eight cities in Australia (7) and New Zealand (1)	Plenary sessions and concurrent sessions (up to 7), including short papers, mini workshops, linked presentations, symposia, roundtables, book clubs, innovative presentations and panel sessions. Conference dinner for participants.
American Evaluation Association (AEA) Conference	Annual 6 days (including 2.5 days of full-day and half-day workshops)	Up to 2,000 attendees	<i>Note: food not provided</i> Members Conference - US\$205-300 Workshops - up to \$360 Non-members Conference - US\$290-385 Workshops - up to \$480 Full-time students Conference - US\$205-300 Workshops - up to \$200	Rotation basis, as selected by AEA.	Demonstrations (how to use or apply a concept or tool), ideas exchanges/networking tables, ignite presentations (20 PPTs, 5 minutes), multipaper, opening/closing sessions, panels, papers, plenary sessions, presentation strand discussion sessions, posters, professional development workshop, roundtable, skill-building workshop and think tanks.
Australian Market & Social Research Society (AMSRS) Annual Conference	Annual 3 days (including 1 day of workshops facilitated by keynotes prior to conference)	Unknown	Members Conference: \$1,420 (early) - \$1,750 Single day: \$700-850 Non-members Conference plus associate m'ship: \$1,750 - \$1,950 Single day: \$850-1,050 Gala dinner Flat rate of \$220	Annual rotation between Sydney and Melbourne	Pre-conference workshops (full-day), dinner for AMSRS Fellows, plenary sessions and break-out sessions (up to 3 concurrent).
Institute of Public Administration Australia (IPAA) International Conference	Annual, with State-based annual conferences also held. 2 days	Up to 1000 participants	Members Individual member \$900-1,200 Corporate member \$1,100-1,400 Day registration (indiv): \$500-650 Day registration (corp): \$600-750 Non-members Conference: \$1,400-1,700 Day registration: \$750-900	Variable across Australian capital cities	Plenary sessions on set topics, break-out sessions (up to 4 concurrent panel sessions), conference dinner.

Sources: AEA: <http://www.eval.org/evaluation2014/>; AMSRS: <http://www.amsrs.com.au/>; IPAA: <http://www.ipaa2014.org.au/>

Appendix E Case study responses (for AES only)

Case study #1

Reside – Melbourne

Employer – Confidential

Occupation – Evaluation Coordinator

AES member – No

Years of experience working in evaluation – 1-3 yrs

Evaluation expertise – Intermediate (in skiing terms I'm doing blue runs – not black or black diamond). Maybe different categories are needed if the term “expert” is too daunting. I think someone at my level is intermediate. The others who have been working on these issues for much longer I would consider are “advanced”, “have a high level of experience”, or “highly skilled”.

Indigenous background – no

Previous AES conferences – no

In Darwin 2014 –

Attending pre-conference workshops	Tuesday
Attending the launch	Yes
Attending the main conference on	Wednesday to Friday
Delivering a presentation	No
Any other activities	N/a

How did you become involved in evaluation?

By chance. I had completed my science degree, had moved to Canberra and was trying to get a job at the Department of Environment. One of the few jobs advertised was in the Monitoring and Evaluation section developing a national evaluation framework for federally funded environment programs. I had no idea what monitoring and evaluation was, but was so happy to have a job in the environment department!

Over the next thirteen years I worked on state and commonwealth government environmental policies on issues such as wetlands, fisheries and wildlife management. My experience was that monitoring and evaluation was increasingly being requested (and expected) by government with very little understanding of how to do it.

It was only when there were massive job cuts at the department where I was working that I started to think of alternative jobs. I did some work for a friend who owns her own evaluation consultancy, and she told me about the Masters of Evaluation at the University of Melbourne. So I decided to jump ship and move into evaluation.

Why is evaluation important to you now?

My two mantras are “why is it being done like that?” and “surely we can be doing this better”. Like most people, I feel very strongly about putting money and effort where it will have the greatest benefit. After working on so many national and state programs, where millions of dollars are spent annually I could see so much work being done, but very little ability to assess whether any changes (positive or negative) were occurring. I look

forward to a time when governments do not fear communicating what hasn't worked (and why) so the same mistakes aren't continually being made.

What are your main motivations for attending the AES conference?

This is the first time I've attended an AES conference. I had wanted to attend last year, however due to issues with timing and finances I wasn't able to attend. Mostly as a learning opportunity - I was keen to attend the sessions and learn from more experienced practitioners. But I was also to meet other evaluators and expand my currently quite small network.

What is the main message you would give to further improve the conference in future?

More practical sessions. The theory sessions are great, but it's easier for me to read journal articles. What I find is missing is the really practical advice sessions – particularly for cost efficiency, value for money.

Could we aim to be more sustainable? I noticed that there was a lot of paper and plastic waste each lunch/ conference session. In Melbourne 2015 I'd love it if we could aim to be a "green" conference - reduce waste and recycle as much as possible. I'm sure Sustainability Victoria would be very happy to advise, assist, promote this approach.

Case study #2

Reside – Hawaii

Employer – University of Hawaii

Occupation – Researcher/Professor/Educator

AES member – No

Years of experience working in evaluation – More than 10 years

Evaluation expertise – Intermediate to Expert

Indigenous background – Maori

Previous AES conferences – No

In Darwin 2014 –

Attending pre-conference workshops	Monday and Tuesday
Attending the launch	Yes
Attending the main conference on	Wednesday to Friday
Delivering a presentation	Yes
Any other activities	Visiting night-market

How did you become involved in evaluation?

As a community health (drug and alcohol) counselor/educator. In my community struggling to know if what I was doing worked, or was working. Sense of obligation to economic justice.

Why is evaluation important to you now?

Because it is all about determining 'value' for others, especially for those being evaluated. It is about re-empowering communities.

What are your main motivations for attending the AES conference?

To learn from others. To find new narratives and discoveries. To network and to share ideas.

What is the main message you would give to further improve the conference in future?

Don't get caught in perpetuating the binary. Learn to work between speakers and values, e.g. science and stories; numbers (data) and literacy needs for more evaluation education/training programs.

Case study #3

Reside – New Zealand

Employer – Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment

Occupation – Research Analyst, Civil Servant

AES member – Yes

Years of experience working in evaluation – 1-3 years

Evaluation expertise – Beginner

Indigenous background – No

Previous AES conferences – None

In Darwin 2014 –

Attending pre-conference workshops	Tuesday
Attending the launch	Yes
Attending the main conference on	Wednesday Thursday Friday
Delivering a presentation	Yes
Any other activities	n/a

How did you become involved in evaluation?

I found myself in it after my Masters Degree when I was looking for work. I didn't want to stop learning and research and evaluation is a way to keep learning.

Why is evaluation important to you now?

It is powerful in that it influences the influencers (policy makers). It makes change for the better.

What are your main motivations for attending the AES conference?

I wanted to present the learnings at a prestigious professional event and AES is it! It's great to have such experienced people together in such an accessible format.

What is the main message you would give to further improve the conference in future?

A bit more planning around logistics/the little practical things. Advanced notice of the program, the buses, accommodation closer to the venue. A venue closer to town. But these are all little things - it's a great conference. Well done y'all!

Case study #4

Reside – Grand Forks, North Dakota, USA

Employer – University of North Dakota, Centre for Rural Health

Occupation – Project evaluator

AES member – Yes

Years of experience working in evaluation – Less than one year

Evaluation expertise – Beginner

Indigenous background – No

Previous AES conferences – None

In Darwin 2014 –

Attending pre-conference workshops	No
Attending the launch	Yes
Attending the main conference on	Wednesday Thursday Friday
Delivering a presentation	Yes
Any other activities	n/a

How did you become involved in evaluation?

In the second year of my masters program I took 'Intro to Evaluation' and 'Advanced Evaluation' the following semester. The class had applied learning projects/assignments to real evaluation projects. These classes also resulted in student work during school year that turned into a full time job.

Why is evaluation important to you now?

It is the current focus of my employment and I think I have learned to approach personal and professional situations differently because of it.

What are your main motivations for attending the AES conference?

Presenting on the Cardiac System of Care project I have been working on, especially looking how we defined a system.

What is the main message you would give to further improve the conference in future?

Logistics information to participants (buses, etc.) ahead of time. As a beginner in evaluation, it would be nice to have a couple of sessions focused on how to enhance skills/knowledge to take ourselves to the next level.

Case study #5

Reside – Confidential

Employer – Confidential

Occupation – Performance and evaluation manager

AES member – No

Years of experience working in evaluation – Less than one year

Evaluation expertise – Beginner

Indigenous background – No

Previous AES conferences – None

In Darwin 2014 –

Attending pre-conference workshops	No
Attending the launch	No
Attending the main conference on	Wednesday Thursday Friday
Delivering a presentation	No
Any other activities	N/a

How did you become involved in evaluation?

I moved from an international organisation that is a global leader in evaluation to an Australian government organisation that collects output data but does not measure and evaluate its outcomes or impact. With the *PGPA Act*, I identified the opportunity to bring across a log-frame approach which will also meet the Performance Framework requirements of the new Act.

Why is evaluation important to you now?

To understand the effectiveness of the organisation, where it is getting the most bang for its buck, the social and non-financial outcomes in line with its purpose, and also to understand any negative externalities caused and reduce them.

What are your main motivations for attending the AES conference?

To learn, to network!

What is the main message you would give to further improve the conference in future?

Excellent content, love the Wisdom Café opportunity, no real critiques or improvements identified.

Case study #6

Reside – Melbourne

Employer – Centre for Program Evaluation, University of Melbourne

Occupation – Research Fellow

AES member – Yes

Years of experience working in evaluation – more than 10 years

Evaluation expertise – Expert

Indigenous background – No

Previous AES conferences – Brisbane 2013; Adelaide 2012; Sydney 2011; Wellington 2010; Melbourne 2007; 1987!

In Darwin 2014 –

Attending pre-conference workshops	No
Attending the launch	Yes
Attending the main conference on	Wednesday Thursday Friday
Delivering a presentation	Yes
Any other activities	n/a

How did you become involved in evaluation?

During my time in TAFE, commenced an evaluation hit with advice from Jerry Winston. Decided to undertake further study in evaluation.

Why is evaluation important to you now?

It is a major part of my work.

What are your main motivations for attending the AES conference?

To present at the conference. To network. To learn new things.

What is the main message you would give to further improve the conference in future?

Be aware of other conferences and incorporate the good things and be aware of the negatives. Don't keep re-inventing the wheel.

Case study #7

Reside – Sydney

Employer – Urbis

Occupation – Consultant, public policy

AES member – Yes

Years of experience working in evaluation – 3-5 years

Evaluation expertise – Intermediate

Indigenous background – No

Previous AES conferences – Sydney 2011

In Darwin 2014 –

Attending pre-conference workshops	No
Attending the launch	Yes
Attending the main conference on	Wednesday Thursday Friday
Delivering a presentation	No
Any other activities	N/a

How did you become involved in evaluation?

I spent seven years working in the public sector and decided I wanted a change. I loved public policy but wanted to experience the private sector. I am a lawyer by profession and enjoy collecting and critically analysing data to reach conclusions. I thought public policy evaluation in a private consulting firm was a perfect fit. It has been four years since I made the move and I have loved the challenge and variety of work.

Why is evaluation important to you now?

Because it can inform program and service improvements that have a real impact on the lives of people, particularly those from disadvantaged or low socio-economic backgrounds.

What are your main motivations for attending the AES conference?

It's a great opportunity to meet like-minded people and network, and also to explore new ideas and methodological approaches to evaluation.

What is the main message you would give to further improve the conference in future?

The content of some of the presentations did not align with what was advertised in the conference book. I know speakers often submit abstracts months in advance and their thinking about what might be a good presentation can change over time. However, where possible, speakers should try to present something that aligns with the abstract because it's that presentation that participants are coming to see.