AES 2011 Conference Evaluation

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Executive Summary

This report summarises feedback on the 2011 Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) international conference in Sydney, Australia. It reflects a decision to go beyond the evaluations done on previous conferences, which focused heavily on participant satisfaction. Instead, this year's evaluation looked at what participants learned from the conference and how likely they think they are to make use of new contacts, information or skills in their future work.

Responses to an online survey indicated that participants assessed their experience highly in terms of what they learned and how they expect to use it. Concerns and criticisms were raised about issues that reduced the opportunity for effective interaction with other participants, or otherwise reduced the opportunity to build on the conference for professional development. Recommendations are given for addressing these concerns and building on this year's evaluation approach for future conferences.

Overview

This evaluation report on the Australasian Evaluation Society's (AES) 2011 international conference is intended to expand on evaluations from previous years, which focused on immediate assessments of participant satisfaction with both pre-conference professional workshops and the conference itself. In contrast, this report draws on an online survey sent to everyone who attended the conference. The survey asked about general levels of satisfaction with the conference, but also asks about what information, skills or contacts participants gained from the conference, and how they are putting what they gained to use. In this way, the survey tries to draw out information on the perceived value of the conference experience.

The impetus for an expanded and revamped evaluation came from the Society's Professional Learning Committee, which proposed a change in approach to the AES Board. The Board agreed to the expanded scope, resulting in this piece of work.

The evaluation of the 2011 conference was intended to be consistent with approaches that have been developed for evaluating education and training initiatives, such as the approach developed by Donald Kirkpatrick. His model of effective education and training has four elements.

- Reaction: how participants react to the experience, including satisfaction
- Learning: degree to which participants change attitudes, gain knowledge, and/or increase skill
- Behaviour: how people change their behaviours as a result of what they have learned
- Results: what is achieved as a result of learning and changed behaviours, such as increased quality or lowered costs

To develop this year's evaluation, discussions were held with David Earle, representing the Professional Learning Committee. A plan was prepared for the project, setting out the scope and objectives. An initial set of questions was drafted and circulated to a group within AES in advance of the conference. David Earle revised the evaluation forms used for pre-conference workshops.

At the conference, unstructured interviews were held with the 2011 conference convenor and others, including the convenors of the upcoming 2012 conference. The 2011 conference convenor noted that the conference organising company (Arinex) provided a great deal of support, and their costs were reasonable in consideration of the value they provided. She discussed different ideas that could be tested out, if resources allow, such as having a journalist run a plenary session to get the audience more involved, or inviting speakers to talk on selected topics in longer, symposium-style sessions. She acknowledged differences of views on the mix and length of papers (discussed by numerous people in their responses to the post-conference online survey), noting that some people want longer sessions but others like shorter ones. She also noted that attracting high quality presentations is another perennial issue. She thought people had responded well to the conference theme, were visibly doing a lot of networking, and were using the opportunity to hold interest group meetings during the conference.

Informal discussions were held throughout the conference with a wide range of participants, to get a sense of their reactions and to test the range of topics being included in the survey. Issues were raised such as the length and mix of papers, how the venue was being used, and what opportunities were available to meet with other people.

In light of discussions at the conference, the questionnaire for the online survey was refined through collaboration with several people within AES, including committee members for the 2012 and 2013 conferences. The questionnaire was subject to peer review by a statistician with experience in survey design and analysis, who provided comments on the questions and response options. A survey was then prepared using the Survey Monkey software package, and tested by several people.

Invitations to participate in the survey were sent via email to 496 people who registered for the conference, including pre-conference workshop participants and those who attended one or more days of the conference. Two reminders were sent to those who had not responded to earlier invitations. Completed surveys were received from 323 people, giving a response rate of 65%. Survey responses were downloaded and analysed for this report. The analysis and reporting will be subject to expert peer review before the report is finalised.

Pre-Conference Workshops

Participant evaluations were analysed for seventeen pre-conference professional workshops, presented by sixteen people. Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with these workshops in eight areas, were asked to identify the best things about the workshops and to give suggestions for how they could be improved, and were asked whether they would recommend the workshops to other people. Finally, they were asked what other topics they would like AES to run workshops on in future.

Assessments were given on a scale of 1 to 4, with descriptive labels varying by question. Overall quality was rated on a scale of poor, satisfactory, good, or excellent. The degree to which the presenter communicated was assessed as poorly, satisfactorily, well, or very well. The extent to which (1) participants gained new ideas and knowledge, (2) the presenter facilitated useful discussion, (3) participants made new connections at the workshop, and (4)the workshop would help improve the participant's professional practice were rated on a scale of "not at all", "to a small extent", "to some extent", or "to a large extent". Finally, participants were asked to rate the workshop organisation and facilities.

Pre-workshop evaluation results were reported separately to presenters.

Topics Suggested for Future Workshops

Participants in pre-conference workshops were asked to identify topics for workshops they would like to see offered through AES. The most common suggestions concerned one or more evaluation methods, such as social network analysis, outcome mapping, meta-evaluation, logic modelling, group techniques for collecting information or achieving consensus on evaluation results, use of new technologies in data collection, systematic reviews, or applying indigenous approaches to research methods. Other suggested topics included statistics, report writing, monitoring techniques, the use of new software packages, or issues about independent evaluation practice.

Conference Evaluations

Overall Reaction to the Conference

The first area considered was about reactions to the conference itself. Respondents were asked to address eight areas concerning the quality of the conference, including an overall assessment of the conference experience. For each, they were asked to respond on a five-point scale ranging from "very dissatisfied" to "highly satisfied". 323 responses were received, with generally high satisfaction levels (around or over 80% responding 4 or 5), with the two exceptions of satisfaction with the quality of presentations and with the opportunity to interact with presenters. In these two areas, 40% of respondents gave ratings of 3 or below.

Figure 1: Overall Satisfaction Levels
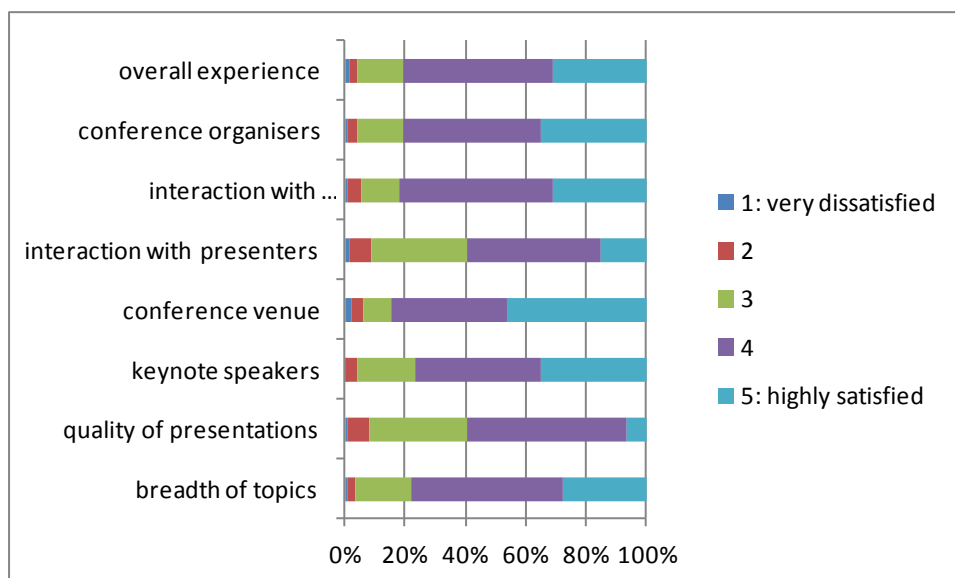
Respondents were asked to identify up to three things they valued most about their 2011 AES conference experience. The most common positive elements cited concerned opportunities for networking, learning or professional development opportunities, and the quality of speakers, especially keynote speakers. 133 people made comments about networking in some way, whether in terms of meeting new people or renewing contact with other people they already knew.

Other responses made frequently included the opportunity to look at indigenous issues, the variety and quality of the presentations generally, the organisation and management of the conference, the venue, and the food.

Respondents were also asked to identify up to three things AES could improve in future conferences. Of the 273 people who made comments, eight said they had nothing to recommend for future improvements. The most common suggestions concerned a need to longer and perhaps fewer sessions, lower costs, improved quality of presentations and/or greater vetting of proposals, and

changes to venue or room arrangements such as seating for meals and room arrangements that allow for roundtable discussions instead of theatre-style seating.

Evaluations of pre-conference workshops also included an open-ended question about how workshops could be improved. Some comments related to the individual workshops, suggesting changes such as more opportunities for discussion, changes to handout materials, longer or shorter sessions, or changes to the breadth and depth of the workshop content. Some comments related to the workshop venue or setup, such as room sizes and layouts.

Value for Presenters

142 respondents said they presented or helped present at the conference, while 181 said they attended the conference without presenting. 111 presented papers, 10 did roundtables, and 16 did mini-workshops. Other responses included poster presentations, pre-conference workshops, and chairing other people's sessions.

It was thought that giving a presentation could be a valuable experience in different ways, ranging from the effort required to prepare for presenting to the possibility of using presentation materials in future publications. Respondents were asked to rate each of the following elements in terms of what value they expected and what value they received.

- Preparing for the presentation
- Delivering the presentation
- Interacting with and receiving feedback from the audience
- Making contacts at the presentation
- Developing materials for future publication

Respondents were asked to rate each item on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (no value) to 5 (great value: life- or career-changing). Responses were generally positive and in the range of 3 to 4, with the lowest values expected or received from preparing materials for later publication. Expectations were somewhat higher than experience, as judged by the larger number who had expected high value from making contacts at their presentations, interacting with their audiences, delivering their presentations, and developing materials for future publication. At issue here is the quality of interaction with other people at the conference, an issue that received numerous comments in the survey. On the other hand, slightly more people said they received high levels of value from preparing their presentations than they had expected.

Figure 2 compares the value expected and received by those making presentations in the five areas.

Figure 2: Values Expected and Received from Presentation Activities
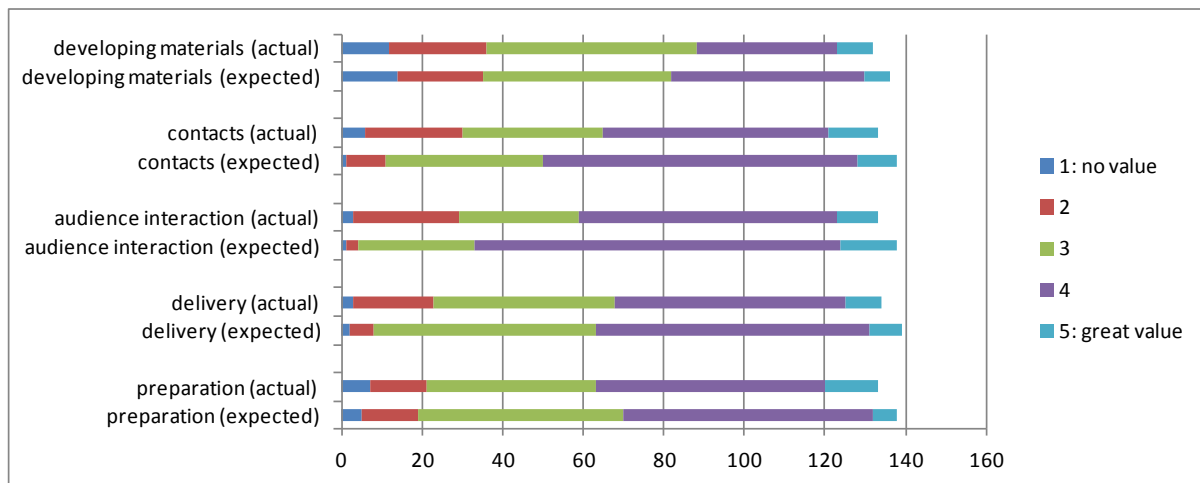
It seems plausible that people who give conference presentations are more actively engaged in the conference, and may therefore be more satisfied with the conference experience as a whole. To test this hypothesis, presenter and non-presenter responses to the question about the quality of the conference (results for all respondents shown in Figure 1) were compared. Responses were very similar for the two groups, with no significant differences in their average satisfaction ratings.

Professional Learning as a Result of Conference Participation

Conference attendees were asked about the extent to which the conference provided knowledge, information, or skills in the following areas:

- new knowledge in their fields of practice
- new knowledge from outside their fields of practice
- awareness of new research or evaluation approaches
- people doing research relevant to their work
- research or evaluation skills

As shown in Figure 3, below, most respondents said that the conference provided them with new knowledge, contacts, or skills. When asked whether the conference provided them with awareness of new research/evaluation skills, only 12% replied 1 or 2 on the 5 point scale (1 meaning "not at all"), while 71% rated it as 4 or 5 ("considerably"). 20% rated it 1 or 2 on providing research/evaluation skills, while 56% rated it 4 or 5.

Figure 3: Extent of New Knowledge, Information, or Skills
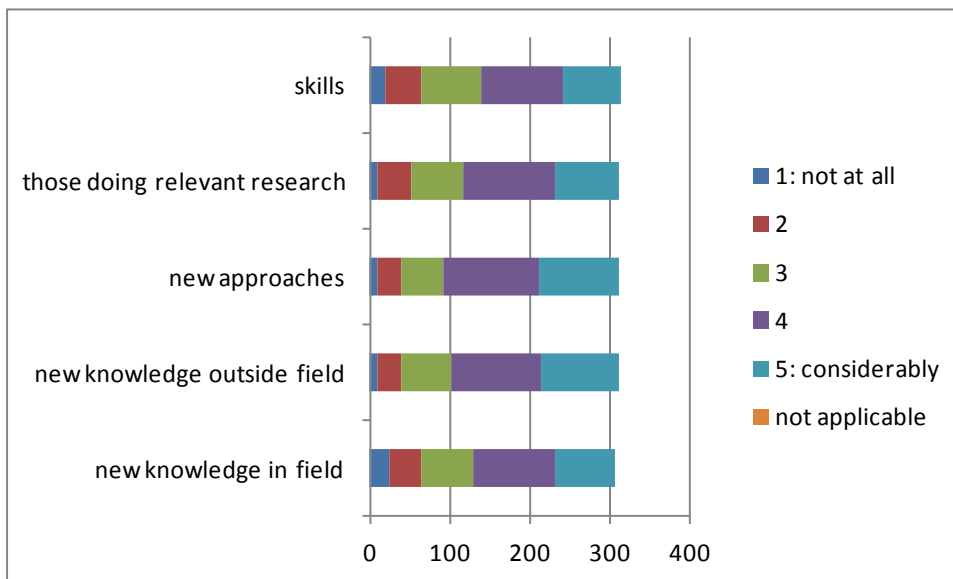
Survey respondents were asked to assess their levels of evaluation knowledge and skills. 47 people described themselves as having no background in evaluation or as novices, while 131 people described their skills as "advanced" or "expert." On average, more highly skilled people gave a lower estimate of the extent to which they gained new knowledge or skills at the conference. The differences were statistically significant across the five areas of knowledge or skills.

When asked for examples of skills or information gained through participation in the conference, numerous people cited logic models, performance measures, qualitative research methods such as the Most Significant Change method and other storytelling approaches, realist evaluation or realist synthesis, participatory evaluation, systems thinking, and the use of new technology for conducting evaluations and presenting results. When asked for examples of information obtained about a policy or program area, examples cited included policies directed at particular demographic groups such as youth or indigenous people, international aid, agriculture, environmental policy, immigration, health, or education.

Less experienced people tended to identify program logic and other such building blocks of evaluation more often as examples of what they had learned through the conference, while more experienced people were more likely to cite things like new information technologies, systems theories, or realist evaluation and realist synthesis.

Behavioural Impacts of Participation

Conference attendees were asked a range of questions about the professional impacts of taking part in the conference. They were asked to assess the extent to which taking part allowed them to:

- renew contact with people they already knew

- make new professional contacts
- collaborate with people outside their usual groups of colleagues
- other

Figure 4: Effects of Participation in Conference
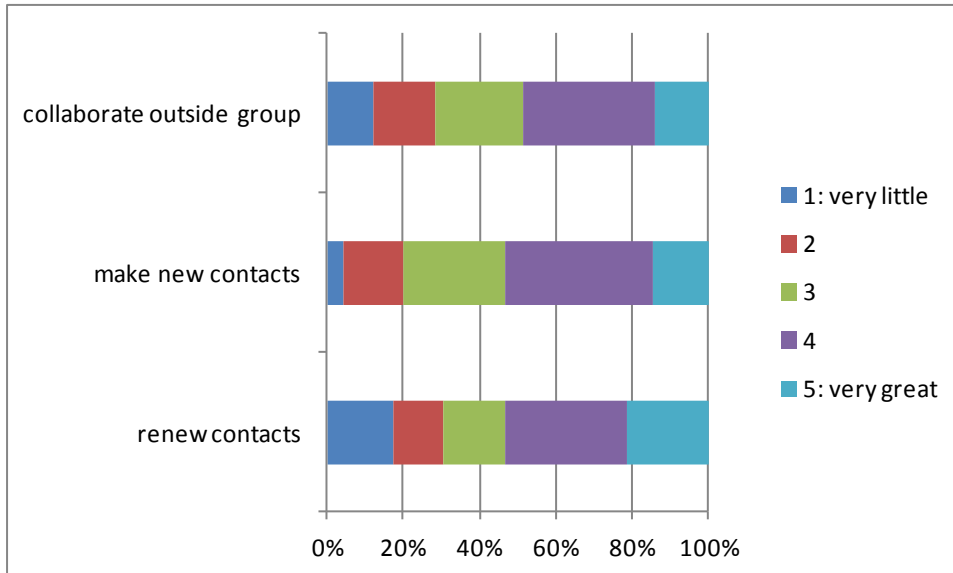
People who assessed their own expertise at higher levels, and therefore could be assumed to be more experienced, were somewhat more likely to say that they had renewed contact with people they already knew than people who were less experienced. On average, however, the responses were almost identical across the different levels of expertise.

Other comments under question #8 included the following:

- Build relationships with people in our organisation that I rarely get to interact with.
- I didn't score the first question because I didn't know anyone before attending so renewing wasn't an option
- Interacting with a group of evaluators and researchers across a number of sectors was stimulating and challenging. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.
- Begin to understand evaluation in the 'tall poppy' context
- Meet people in the evaluation space
- The pre-conference workshops were a particularly good way of meeting new people
- This was a bit more difficult - there wasn't a lot of time to meet people there and then without missing presentations, and difficult to find people again in the teatime-lunchtime scrum. I didn't have contacts there already, so haven't answered two of the questions deliberately
- Whatever happened to the welcome 'cocktail' session to meet old and new contacts?
- Learn about new evaluation techniques and theories
- Meet new clients!
- Look at sub-groups
- Get a first and in-depth insight into the Australian evaluation area

When asked how they expected to use new contacts in future, people gave the following responses (multiple responses were allowed):

Not applicable: did not make new contacts	34
To seek information on relevant work done elsewhere	200
To collaborate on new work	123
To get peer review or comment on work	71
Don't know	37

Results: Making Use of the Conference Experience

Respondents were asked how likely they were to make use of evaluation approaches or skills, evaluation findings, or contacts in their current or future work. Respondents were the most optimistic about applying research/evaluation approaches or methods in their work, with 77% rating the likelihood at 4 or 5 out of 5. They were least optimistic about applying contacts made with people in other countries, with 49% rating the probability at the lowest two levels.

Figure 5: Likelihood of Application in Current or Future Work
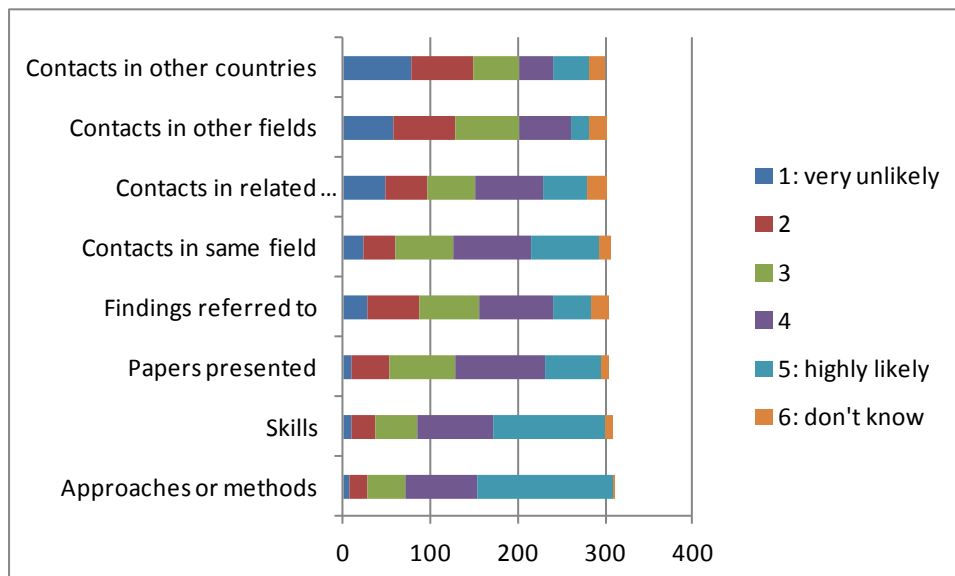
People who attended the 2010 conference in Wellington, New Zealand were asked to reflect on their experience since that time. 65 people said they attended the Wellington conference. Of these, 46 said they had made contacts that extended their professional networks. 34 said they had identified useful research, 34 learned about research/evaluation approaches that they plan to use in future work, and 33 said they learned about research/evaluation methods that they have already used in their work.

# Information about Participants and their Conference Attendance

When asked why they attended the 2011 conference, respondents gave the following answers:

- 81 to attend a workshop
- 109 to hear the keynote speakers
- 246 for training and professional development
- 111 to give a paper
- 171 for networking.

Other reasons included presenting a poster session, to become more involved in the AES, to provide support to grant recipients, to run a workshop, to gain broader knowledge of evaluation, to connect with peers, to pick up new ideas, or because they were involved already in the conference planning and delivery.

When asked about what factors affect the decision on whether or not to attend a conference, positively or negatively, 70% or more cited internationally recognised speakers, networking opportunities, and the conference program as incentives to attend. Over 60% said that having their employer pay was an incentive. Disincentives included travel or registration costs (22% and 24%), time away from work or family (29% or 33%), and location (only 22% cited the conference location and its opportunities as an incentive for attending).

Figure 6: Factors Affecting Decision to Attend a Conference
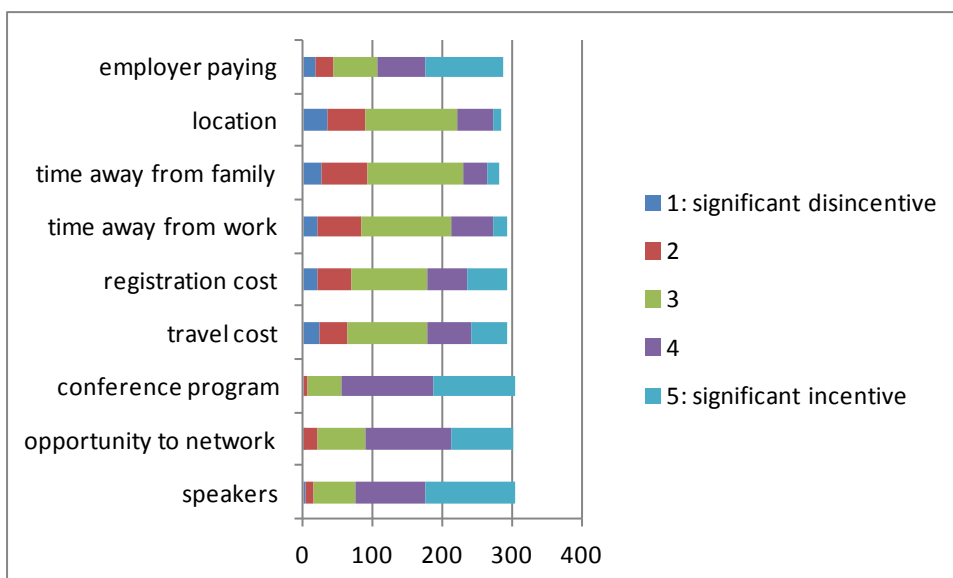
312 people assessed their evaluation knowledge and skill as follows:

- No background: 1
- Novice: 46
- Intermediate: 134

- Advanced: 105
- Expert: 26

121 people described themselves professionally as evaluators, with a further five describing themselves as both evaluators and researchers or auditors. 59 described themselves as researchers, 21 as policy analysts, 51 as project officers or project managers, and 35 as managers. Other responses included quality coordinators, a caseworker, an evaluation theorist, organisational consultants, data analysts, management consultants, and researchers.

202 people do most of their work in government, with 131 based in government. The next largest group was the community or not-for-profit sector, with 68 people working in the sector and 47 based in the sector. 70 people were based in the private for-profit sector, and 45 in the academic sector.

139 people said they anticipate attending the 2012 conference. 43 said they do not anticipate attending, and 120 said they don't know whether they will attend or not. 119 said they are likely to attend the 2013 conference, 22 are not likely to, and 170 do not know whether they will attend or not. Stated preferences for location of the 2013 conference were as follow:

- Brisbane: 93
- Cairns: 82
- Gold Coast: 44
- No preference: 91

122 people said the location would not affect their decision about attending the 2013 conference at all, 132 said it would affect their decision to some extent, and 49 to a large or very large extent. 9 said they didn't know how it would affect their decision on attending.

218 respondents reported that they are AES members and 88 are non-members. Six said they didn't know whether they were members or not. 194 members plan to retain their membership. 38 non-members said they are likely to join over the next year, with 32 unsure and 16 unlikely to join.

Conclusion

This survey of AES 2011 conference participants, as well as evaluations filled out by pre-conference workshop attendees, provides evidence of learning and skill development in support of professional practice. Consistently with Kirkpatrick's learning theory, participants generally had a positive reaction to the conference experience, concluded that the conference provided them with information and skills, and thought the experience was likely to change their professional practice in future.

Future conferences should build on the 2011 experience by addressing the issues most commonly identified as areas for improvement, especially with regard to improving opportunities for making

contacts, interacting with others, and improving opportunities for people to react to presentations (whether by allowing more time or by arranging rooms to promote round table or similar formats).

Comparison of responses from the more experienced and expert evaluators and those with less experience highlights differences between what different audiences expect and receive from a conference. Less experienced people have more development to do in terms of knowledge and skills, while more experienced people may come to a conference more for interaction with peers than for learning.

Support for effective interaction and learning

The most significant issue emerging from the survey concerning ways to improve the conference experience and increase its impact concerned ways in which it could have been made more conducive to interaction between participants, whether presenters or audience members. Issues were raised in both pre-conference workshop evaluations and the post-conference survey. Time allowed for discussion at papers was the most commonly raised issue (66 people suggested longer time slots for presentations, at the expense of fewer presentations if necessary). Physical arrangements of the rooms were also seen as important, with the size and layout of the rooms needing adaptation to the needs of individual sessions and the number of people interested in attending them. Flexibility of room arrangements would be valuable, allowing for changes in room arrangements for new sessions if desired.

Other mechanisms could be tried to promote interaction between participants. An official conference reception on the first day was suggested by several people, as well as specific changes such as an arrangement for people new to the field and profession to be matched up to more experienced peers. Another mechanism used at previous conferences is to have rooms set aside during the conference for unscheduled sessions, to be used if desired by people who want to continue or initiate discussions on topics they choose.

Conference program

The conference program itself—the number of papers, the range of policy areas covered, and the organisation of papers into distinct streams—is a perennial issue of debate for AES. It was notable that quite mixed views were expressed in the survey about keynote speakers. Some people cited them as among the best elements of the conference, while others were highly critical of keynotes, saying they did not stimulate debate or otherwise add much value. When and how to put material online is another issue that needs further consideration. If presenters were to make more than their abstracts available before the conference and if audience members would read it before their sessions, presenters could spend less time explaining their work and allow more time for discussion.

Conference management and costs

Conference costs were repeatedly cited as an issue, although the high level of attendance at the 2011 conference would seem to suggest that costs were not too great a disincentive. Conference support and organisation was generally cited as a positive factor, although some survey respondents cited problems with their arrangements.

Recommendations

Two types of recommendations follow from this evaluation of the 2010 AES conference—one set dealing with future conferences, and the other with future evaluations of conference impacts. The latter seeks to build on and extend the approach adopted for this year's evaluation.

Maximising opportunities for interaction between conference participants

Conference programs, schedules, and rooms should be structured to promote interaction between participants and between participants and speakers. The characteristics of each venue will constrain the extent to which rooms can be arranged differently to suit different session types, whether presentations or round table (small group) discussions. Some sessions require more time than others, although speakers may not accurately estimate the length of time they really need.

Since comments were made about the extent to which presenters use most of their allotted time to summarise what they did instead of engaging with the audience, presenters should be encouraged in future to shift their focus away from simply reporting their results. One way to encourage this shift in behaviour may be to encourage them to make a summary of their papers available for posting in advance of the conference, at greater length than their abstracts.

Computers or wireless Internet access should be made more easily and cheaply available during the conference, making it easier to communicate to participants and gather feedback from them during the conference.

Other mechanisms should be considered to encourage interaction, such as having open sessions in the schedule during which groups could discuss ideas or developments at greater length, perhaps following on from other sessions. These sessions would be self-organised by participants, if and when required. The opening reception provides another opportunity for people to meet and establish contacts that continue during the conference and after it, and should be part of the program. Arrangements for breaks, especially lunch, should also facilitate discussions. Numerous people commented on the lack of lunch seating, making it more difficult to talk in small groups over the meal.

Building on 2011 conference experience

To build on this year's conference and its new approach to the conference evaluation, more should be done to collect feedback on the conference experience and its effects. For the 2011 conference, a delay between the conference and the survey was introduced to allow some time for reflection on what was learned and on the likelihood of using it in practice. This came at a cost in the immediacy of reaction to the conference experience itself. A solution to this conflict between the desire for immediate feedback and greater reflection may come from separating the feedback process into two stages. An online survey could be available to participants during the conference, focused on the conference and its arrangements. A separate survey, based on this year's but revised if and as appropriate, would be sent out to all participants in the month after the conference, as was done this year.

It would be useful to collect stories on how people apply the skills, ideas, and contacts they get through the conference. This could be done through different means, such as the regional groups or the AES website.

It is unclear that a separate evaluation form is still needed for the pre-conference workshops. A separate set of questions could be included in the survey to be held open during the conference, with respondents skipping those questions if they did not attend such a workshop. This would replace the paper-based evaluation forms.

A strategy for collecting more information on network building and application should be developed. This could include an approach of recruiting a sample of attendees and asking them to detail their professional networks during and after the conference, identifying any changes resulting from the conference experience. Other approaches may be developed. The AES Board should identify someone to do further work on this issue.

Finally, the online survey questionnaire should be reviewed each year to determine whether other questions or topics are needed, or whether changes in questions should be made.