

# Evaluation of the AES 2015 International Evaluation Conference “Reaching Across Boundaries”, Melbourne, Australia



## Evaluation Report for the Australasian Evaluation Society

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## 1. Executive Summary

The AES 2015 International Evaluation Conference was held in Melbourne from September 6-9, 2015. Themed “Reaching Across Boundaries”, the AES 2015 conference attracted over 500 participants. Data collection from attendees and non-attendees was conducted during and after the conference to answer the following evaluation questions: Overall, did the conference attendees perceive there was value in attending the conference? If so, why? If not, why not? Specific questions this evaluation report addresses are:

1. What were the reasons participants registered for the AES 2015 conference?
2. What were the reasons that non-participants did not register for the AES 2015 conference?
3. Did conference participants find the conference valuable? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. What elements of the conference were most valuable to participants?
5. What elements of the conference were least valuable to participants?
6. Do participants perceive they are likely to change their evaluation practice in any way as a result of attending the conference? If so, how?
7. How could the conference be improved in future?

Attendees of the conference perceived there was value in attending: approximately four-fifths of respondents (79%) found it “fairly valuable” or “extremely valuable”, although this is a small drop from the 85% who found the 2014 conference “fairly” or “extremely valuable”. The AES 2015 attendees particularly valued the networking and learning opportunities offered.

The main reasons participants registered for the AES 2015 conference were:

- To take advantage of the **networking opportunities**
- **The papers in the parallel sessions**
- The **location** (Melbourne).

Emerging reasons why participants registered for the conference included:

- They were **speaking or presenting at the conference**
- The **learning opportunities**.

Few participants indicated that “the cost of conference registration seemed like good value” was a key motivator for registering.

Key findings on why non-participants did not register for AES 2015 were:

- The **cost of attending** the AES 2015 conference in Melbourne, including the cost of registration and travel/accommodation
- Over half (54.2%) of those who responded to the non-attendee survey indicated they were **unlikely to attend** the AES conference in Perth in 2016.

Reducing the cost, improving the calibre of the keynote speakers, making the conference more practical and having higher quality presentations were the main factors that respondents suggested would make the next AES conference a ‘must attend’ event for them.

Key findings on whether the conference attendees found the conference valuable, or not, and why:

- Approximately four-fifths (79%) of respondents either found the conference “fairly valuable” or “extremely valuable”.
- The percentage of respondents who found the conference “of some value, but not a great deal” has increased from 2014 to 2015.
- Respondents to the 2015 online attendee survey found the **learning** and **networking** opportunities, **the expertise and knowledge of presenters**, the **breadth and variety of presenters** and **the opportunity to present at the conference** as the most valuable elements of the conference.

- Additional elements the respondents were particularly impressed with or satisfied by included the **organisation of the conference**, the **food**, the **venue**, **Sched** (the conference app) plus **exposure to new concepts**.
- Presenters particularly valued the **IT and technology support** provided at the venue on the day, and many presenters commented on the high quality of the support provided to them by the AES.
- Of the AES services provided including social events, the various **plenary sessions** were seen as the most valuable of this group of conference elements, followed by the **AES International Awards Dinner** and then the **opening cocktail party**.

Elements that the respondents found least valuable, were unimpressed with or were dissatisfied by for AES 2015 were:

- The **room sizes** and **lack of seating**, some or all of the **keynote speakers** and the **varying quality of presentations**.
- Least valuable events or ancillary services were the **live captioning** of the conference sessions and the **poster presentations**, although more people found these of value than not.
- The least used social media or IT options for the conference were **blogs**, the **Facebook page** and the **star rating survey button** within Sched (the conference app), to rate individual presentations within a session.

Key findings on whether AES 2015 conference attendees perceived that they would be likely to change their evaluation practice in any way as a result of attending the conference were:

- Close to two-thirds (61.6%) of survey respondents indicated they would be **likely to change their evaluation practice** as a result of attending the conference.
- Many of these indicated that they would use, adopt or have an increased understanding of a specific skill or approach, including **evaluation capacity building**, **logic models/maps**, **data-visualisation** and **sense-making**.
- Others made general comments about incorporating approaches or new ideas into their practice.
- Others indicated they would incorporate further elements gained from the conference such as improved **evaluation planning**, **commission and management**, specific approaches for engaging with **Indigenous evaluators/communities**, the use of **technology** in evaluation and increased **attention to theory**.

Areas for potential improvement for future AES conferences include:

- Showcasing more high-profile, international and challenging **keynote speakers**
- Focusing on parallel presentations of **quality over quantity**
- Improving **room allocations** and **seating arrangements**
- Lowering the **cost of conference registration**
- Increasing the **opportunities for networking**.

Overall, the AES International Evaluation Conference in Melbourne was valued by attendees, although there are some actions the AES could take to make it even more attractive and valued by AES members and interested non-members. The suggestions made throughout this report are for continuous improvement purposes, particularly for the next AES International Evaluation Conference to be held in Perth in 2016.

## 2. Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the contributions of the following people to this report:

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Albie Colvin, for use of the conference photographs throughout this report

Jacqueline Diamond, AES Events and Member Services Officer and Conference Manager, and

AES members and non-members who participated in the participatory evaluation exercise at the conference, responded to surveys and requests for interviews for this evaluation report.



*The main reason why people registered for AES 2015 was to take advantage of the networking opportunities.*

## 3. Background

### 3.1 About the AES

The Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) is the professional organisation for evaluation professionals in Australia and New Zealand, and the broader Pacific region. It has 860 members involved in all facets of evaluation and performance measurement. The vision of the AES is “Quality evaluation that makes a difference” and the mission is “to strengthen and promote evaluation practice, theory and use” (Australasian Evaluation Society, 2014, inside cover).

The AES is governed by a Board of six directors and employs two staff: an Executive Director and Events and Member Services Manager. The secretariat is based in Melbourne, Australia.

The aims of the AES are to:

- Establish and promote ethics and standards in evaluation practice
- Encourage advances in the theory and practice of evaluation
- Provide education and training related to evaluation
- Provide forums for networking, professional development and the discussion of ideas
- Increase understanding of evaluation and advocate for quality evaluation
- Be inclusive of Indigenous and all other cultural perspectives
- Have governance systems that reflect and incorporate best practice
- Provide a forum that allows the diverse voices of the community to be heard, including those who commission the evaluations, those who carry them out and the evaluands
- Other activities consistent with these aims.  
(AES. About the Australasian Evaluation Society. <http://www.aes.asn.au/about-us/about-the-aes.html> Accessed 12 November 2015)

To fulfil its aims, the AES engages its members through regional networks and Special Interest Groups, produces publications and offers a comprehensive professional development program.

AES regional networks exist in NZ and all states and territories of Australia. The AES convenes three Special Interest Groups (Realist Evaluation and Realist Synthesis SIG; Eval-Tech SIG; and the newly-launched Evaluation in Higher Education SIG) to engage members in its work.

Publications produced by the AES include:

- An annual report
- The Evaluation Journal of Australasia
- AES e-news
- AES Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations
- AES Code of Ethics
- Stories of Evaluation Learning series.

The AES offers its members and interested non-members a comprehensive professional development program, guided by the AES Professional Learning Committee. AES professional development resources and events include a calendar of workshops and seminars throughout Australia and New Zealand plus the Evaluators' Professional Learning Competency Framework, designed to guide AES members in building the competencies, knowledge and expertise in evaluation. It also offers an annual Awards program, the AES Awards for Excellence in Evaluation which recognise outstanding evaluation capacity-building, evaluation systems or evaluation practice in Australasia. The flagship professional development event for the AES is the annual AES International Evaluation Conference.

### 3.2 About the AES International Evaluation Conferences

The AES International Evaluation Conference is held annually. It is an international event and draws participants from across New Zealand, Australia, the Pacific and beyond. The annual conference is the largest professional development event on the AES calendar, and is hosted on a rotational basis across cities in Australia and New Zealand.

The annual conference hosts the AES Annual General Meeting, the AES Awards for Excellence in Evaluation and meetings of SIGs. AES conferences are usually preceded by two days of conference workshops while the AES conference is usually of three days duration.

The AES has been hosting conferences for decades and conference locations rotate through where the AES has regional networks. Recent conferences have been held in the following locations:

- Darwin 2014
- Brisbane 2013
- Adelaide 2012
- Sydney 2011
- Wellington 2010
- Canberra 2009
- Perth 2008

### 3.3 About the AES 2015 International Evaluation Conference

The evaluation is the AES 2015 International Evaluation Conference, held in Melbourne from September 6-9, 2015. Themed "Reaching Across Boundaries", the AES conference attracted over 500 participants. The AES conference was preceded by two days of pre-conference workshops, which are out of the scope for this evaluation.

The 2015 AES International Evaluation Conference showcased 61 sessions over three and a half days, plus a special session of the AES Annual General Meeting. The sessions were a mix of plenary and concurrent sessions, with over 115 presentations across these 61 sessions. Each session was allocated to one of nine conference strands (excluding the AES Annual General Meeting):

- Plenary session
- A profession to serve whom?
- Enrich our theories
- Indigenous evaluation
- Methods to make it work
- Population and evaluation
- President's stream
- Programs government and policy
- Special session.

### 3.4 About the Evaluation of the AES 2015 International Evaluation Conference

The AES 2015 conference was evaluated by Emma Walters (the consultant). Ms Walters is a freelance consultant and postgraduate student in the Master of Evaluation at the University of Melbourne, and this evaluation project is the focus of her final 'capstone' subject in the Masters degree. Ms Walters' capstone project was overseen by an experienced Evaluation Fellow, John Stoney.

### 3.5 Limitations of this evaluation

One of the key limitations for this evaluation was the short period between assignment of the evaluation project and the start of the AES conference. The University of Melbourne Capstone coordinator suggested the project in late July, and an initial phone hook-up was held between the consultant evaluator and the AES in early August 2015. This left a period of approximately 4 weeks to be introduced to the key stakeholders, draft and agree the evaluation plan, prepare materials and organise logistics, before the conference start date in on 6 September 2015.

A further limitation is that in 2014 the AES conference was evaluated by two capstone students. In 2015, the conference was evaluated by one capstone student. As such, the focus of the evaluation was narrowed from 2014, as outlined in the next section.

Another limitation is that the self-rating of evaluation expertise (as used throughout this report) is subjective, and subject to differing perceptions of respondents knowledge/skills in relation to evaluation.

There is also likely to be some crossover between online survey respondents and one-on-one interview respondents. Interviews were conducted during the conference while the survey was sent out post-conference to all those who registered. There was no limitation preventing those who participated in an interview from completing the online attendee survey.

Finally, the impact of the conference on participants' practice of evaluation is largely out of the scope of this evaluation, as the conference evaluation took place during and immediately after the conference. An impact evaluation would need to be conducted much later after the conference to determine if there has been any change in practice. Consideration in future evaluations of the AES conference should be given to the broader impact of the conference on participants, particularly on the professionalism of the evaluation profession in Australasia. Such an evaluation could investigate whether there is evidence for causal linkages between increasing evaluator professionalism and conference attendance (or indeed the broader suite of AES professional development activities); or the contribution of the AES professional development activities to any increase (or otherwise) in evaluator professionalism. However, this kind of impact evaluation of the AES conferences is outside the scope of this evaluation project. Nevertheless, this evaluation has addressed participants' perception of the impact of the conference on their practice of evaluation.



## 4. Purpose of Evaluation

The 2014 AES International Evaluation Conference was evaluated across three themes:

- The Participant Experience
- Organisation and Logistics
- Strategic Alignment (with AES goals).

There were two student evaluators who jointly conducted the 2014 conference evaluation while in 2015 there was a single student evaluator. After discussions with the AES Executive Officer, it was agreed that this evaluation should focus only on the first of the 2014 themes, “The Participant Experience.”

Discussions with the AES Executive Officer and the 2015 Conference Program Chair indicated there are several reasons that the annual conference is evaluated:

- To incorporate lessons learned from the current year’s conference into planning for the following year’s conference
- To model best practice (being the professional association of evaluators)
- To offer opportunities for students from the Master of Evaluation to demonstrate their professional expertise.

Using Owen’s typography, this evaluation was primarily a Monitoring Form of evaluation, in that it is “assessing Program processes and outcomes, for fine tuning and to account for Program resources” (Owen, 2007, p. 239). The evaluation was primarily conducted to monitor program outcomes for the purpose of improvement for the following year’s event. Another aspect of the evaluation was to gauge the impact of the conference on attendees – whether people perceived they will utilise the information in their practice of evaluation, to find out what people will ‘take away’ from the conference. As such, it was a Monitoring Form with limited consideration of the impact on participants: what has been examined in terms of impact is attendees’ perceptions of what material, concepts, networks and resources they believe they will or won’t use in the future in their evaluation practice.



*The cost of attending the AES 2015 conference in Melbourne, including the cost of registration and travel/accommodation, was the main reason why non-attendees chose not to register.*

## 5. Key evaluation questions

After discussions with AES key stakeholders, the following is the key evaluation question being addressed: Overall, did the conference attendees perceive there was value in attending the conference? If so, why? If not, why not?

Specific questions to be addressed include:

1. What were the reasons participants registered for the AES 2015 conference?
2. What were the reasons that non-participants did not register for the AES 2015 conference?
3. Did conference participants find the conference valuable? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. What elements of the conference were most valuable to participants?
5. What elements of the conference were least valuable to participants?
6. Do participants perceive they are likely to change their evaluation practice in any way as a result of attending the conference? If so, how?
7. How could the conference be improved in future?

## 6. Methodology

An evaluation plan was drafted by the consultant and provided to the AES. The plan specified details of the proposed methodology for the evaluation, the audiences, the key evaluation questions, the data collection and analysis methods, and dissemination plans. The evaluation plan was submitted to several key evaluation stakeholders (AES 2015 Conference Program Chair, AES 2015 Conference Convenor, AES President, AES Executive Officer) and, after several iterations, was agreed.

The data collection involved a range of methods which were conducted at various points of the evaluation timeline:

### Pre-conference

- desk review of documents
- selected key informant interviews

### During-conference

- semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants
- session-by-session feedback from participants via online Wufoo survey

### Post-conference

- online attendee survey via SurveyMonkey
- online non-attendee survey via SurveyMonkey.

Considerations for each of these data collection methods and management is included in Table 1 below:

*Table 1: Data Collection Methods, Sampling & Analysis Strategies, Considerations and Actual Responses*

Data Collection Method	Data Collection Tool	Sampling and Population	Analysis Strategy	Other Considerations for Planning	Actual Data Collection Timings and Responses
<b>Document review</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Various documents were provided by the AES and the previous capstone students</li> </ul>
<b>Key informant interviews</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-structured interview guide</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purposive sampling</li> <li>• 3 interviews</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2 key informant interviews conducted</li> </ul>
<b>Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convenience sampling</li> <li>• Target of 18 interviews out of population of 500+ participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Record and transcribe interviews</li> <li>• General inductive approach to data analysis to generate themes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each interview planned to take 10-15 mins; 2 per break x 3 breaks x 3 days = 18 interviews</li> <li>• Not representative so limited generalisations can be drawn</li> <li>• Utilise to provide rich data to extrapolate on findings of survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 pilot interviews conducted on Day 2 of the conference, Monday 7 September 2015 (excluded from analysis)</li> <li>• 23 face-to-face interviews conducted on Days 3 and 4 of the conference, 8-9 September 2015</li> <li>• Interviews transcribed</li> </ul>
<b>Session-by-session feedback from participants via online Wufoo survey</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wufoo: 3 online questions prepared by AES relating to presentation Delivery &amp; Content (rating 1 to 5 stars); General (open response)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-selected sample</li> <li>• Population of 500+ participants across 61 sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Star ratings to be exported to Excel and tabulated; presented by session and by conference strands</li> <li>• Open responses to be coded and presented thematically</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Response rate likely to be low: Each participant will be likely to attend up to 16 sessions across the 3.5 days, with some sessions containing three presentations. It is unlikely that each participant will use the Wufoo app to rate all sessions</li> <li>• As it is a new survey tool being adopted by AES, participant utilisation of the Wufoo platform may be limited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 117 responses received (from over 115 presentations across 61 sessions) averaging about one rater per presentation.</li> <li>• The response rate is too low for meaningful conclusions to be drawn</li> </ul>

Data Collection Method	Data Collection Tool	Sampling and Population	Analysis Strategy	Other Considerations for Planning	Actual Data Collection Timings and Responses
<b>Online attendee survey</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2014 conference evaluation online SurveyMonkey form utilised, with minor modifications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Survey was sent to entire population of conference attendees (507 attendees)</li> <li>Target response rate of at least 30% of attendees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SurveyMonkey data exported to excel and analysed, including utilisation of pivot tables to present responses grouped by demographic characteristics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilising the 2014 survey enables over-time comparisons</li> <li>33% response rate achieved in 2014</li> <li>50% achieved in 2013</li> <li>57% achieved in 2012</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pilot survey distributed to 16 AES members (Conference Organising Committee and Program Committee), with 7 responses; pilot survey open from 20-26 September 2015</li> <li>Minor modifications made to survey after pilot</li> <li>Survey invitation distributed to 507 conference attendees</li> <li>219 responses (43.2% response rate)</li> <li>Survey open from 29 September – 16 October 2015 (2.5 weeks)</li> <li>Initial invitation sent 29 September 2015, with follow up reminders on 8 and 14 October 2015</li> </ul>
<b>Online non-attendee survey</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2014 conference non-attendee evaluation online SurveyMonkey form utilised, with minor modifications</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Form sent to all AES members (approximately 860) with a request for those who did not attend the conference to complete.</li> <li>Target response rate of at least 15% of population</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>SurveyMonkey data to be exported to excel and analysed, utilising pivot tables to present by demographic characteristics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilising the 2014 form enables 2015 and 2014 comparisons</li> <li>16% response rate in 2014</li> <li>Consideration to provide incentive to respondents to increase response rate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Survey invitation sent to all AES members (approximately 860)</li> <li>48 responses (5.6% response rate, which is low)</li> <li>Survey open from 21 October – 9 November 2015</li> </ul>

The following were the methods proposed for collecting and managing information to address the evaluation questions.

For evaluation questions 1, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7:

1. What were the reasons participants registered for the AES 2015 conference?
3. Did conference participants find the conference valuable? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. What elements of the conference were most valuable to participants?
5. What elements of the conference were least valuable to participants?
6. Do participants perceive they are likely to change their evaluation practice in any way as a result of attending the conference? If so, how?
7. How could the conference be improved in future?

The following data collection methods were utilised:

- semi-structured face-to-face interviews with participants
- session-by-session feedback from participants via online Wufoo survey
- online attendee survey via SurveyMonkey.

For evaluation question 2 “What were the reasons that non-participants did not register for the AES 2015 conference?” the online non-attendee survey via SurveyMonkey was data collection method.

The participant information statement, consent form and interview guide for the face-to-face interview are attached as Appendix A. The online attendee survey is attached as Appendix B. The online non-attendee survey is attached as Appendix C.

Spelling mistakes were corrected where they existed in respondent comments utilised for this report.

Outputs of the 2015 conference evaluation are the draft and final conference evaluation reports.



*Many participants valued the venue for AES 2015, the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, although a small number indicated it was too big and impersonal.*

## 7. Findings

### 7.1 Demographics of online attendee survey respondents

#### *Where were conference attendees based (home or main work location)?*

The greatest number of survey respondents who answered this question were based in Victoria, with 42.1% (n=85) nominating Victoria as their main work location. This was followed by NSW (16.8%, n=34), the ACT (9.4%, n=19) and Aotearoa/New Zealand (8.4%, n=17). Only 4.5% (n=9) came from locations outside of Australia and New Zealand. Those who specified the other locations included the UK, Zimbabwe, Canada and Samoa. Comparisons to 2014 demographic data of conference attendees to the Darwin conference had similar results, apart a higher percentage of Victorian-based attendees in 2015. The number of NZ-based conference attendees increased on 2014: 17 attended from NZ in 2015, while 11 from NZ attended Darwin in 2014. Table 2 provides the respondents' home / main work locations.

*Table 2: Respondents' Home/Main Work Location*

Where are you based (home / main work location) Select one		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Australia – VIC	42.1%	85
Australia – NSW	16.8%	34
Australia – ACT	9.4%	19
Aotearoa / New Zealand	8.4%	17
Australia – QLD	6.9%	14
Australia – SA	4.5%	9
Australia – WA	3.5%	7
Other (please specify)	3.0%	6
Australia – NT	2.5%	5
Australia – TAS	1.5%	3
Other Australasia (e.g Papua New Guinea, Pacific Islands)	1.5%	3
	<b>answered question</b>	<b>202</b>
	<b>skipped question</b>	<b>17</b>

#### *How did conference attendees rate their expertise in evaluation?*

Of the conference attendees who responded to the online attendee survey and answered a question about their expertise, 40.3% (n=83) rated themselves as having “Intermediate” knowledge and skills in relation to the conduct and use of evaluation. The next largest group was those who rated themselves as having “Advanced” knowledge and skills (34%, n=70). Table 3 provides this data.

*Table 3: Respondents' Self-rated Knowledge/Skills in Relation to Conduct and Use of Evaluation*

How would you describe your knowledge and skills in relation to the conduct and use of evaluation? Select one		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
No background	1.5%	3
Novice	15.0%	31
Intermediate	40.3%	83
Advanced	34.0%	70
Expert	9.2%	19
<b>answered question</b>		<b>206</b>
<b>skipped question</b>		<b>13</b>

The limitations of this self-rating of conference attendees' expertise has been noted above. However, when this question is compared with a question on the number of past AES conference attended, those who have self-rated as "Advanced" or "Expert" have nominated that they have attended more conferences than those who self-rated as "No Background", "Novice" or "Intermediate".

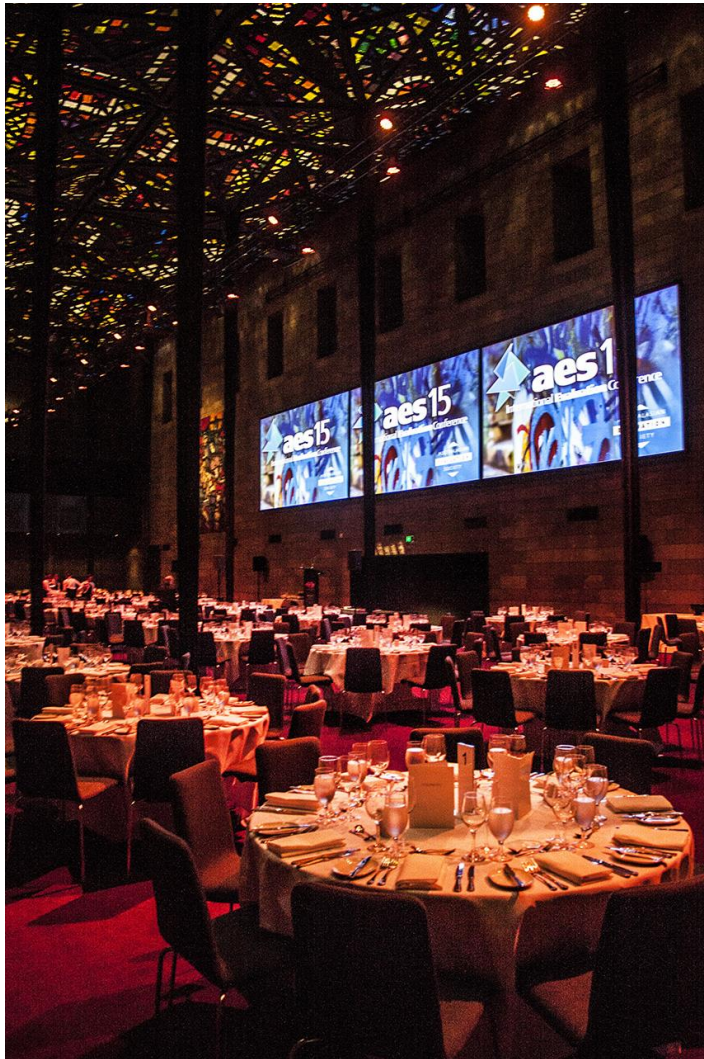
- "Experts" have attended an average of 3.3 of the last 7 conferences
- "Advanced" have attended an average of 2 of the last 7 conferences
- "Intermediate" have attended an average of less than one conference out of the last 7
- "Novice" and "No background" have attended almost no previous conferences.

Table 4 shows the number of AES conferences attended across these skills/experience groups.

*Table 4: Previous AES Conferences Attended*

Which previous AES conferences have you attended, if any? Select all that apply							
How would you describe your knowledge and skills in relation to the conduct and use of evaluation? Select one							
Answer Options	No background	Novice	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	Response Percent	Response Count
Darwin 2014	0	2	18	21	8	23.9%	49
Brisbane 2013	0	0	20	29	11	29.3%	60
Adelaide 2012	0	0	15	23	9	22.9%	47
Sydney 2011	0	0	12	26	8	22.4%	46
Wellington 2010	0	0	6	12	9	13.2%	27
Canberra 2009	0	0	7	17	10	16.6%	34
Perth 2008	0	0	0	11	8	9.3%	19
One or more AES conference before 2008	0	0	8	18	9	17.1%	35
None of the above – have never attended an AES conference	3	29	45	15	3	46.3%	95
<b>answered question</b>							<b>205</b>
<b>skipped question</b>							<b>1</b>

From 2014 to 2015, there has been a small decrease in the percentage of respondents to the online attendee survey who have described themselves as Expert – this has reduced from 16% (n=16) in 2014 to 9.2% (n=19) in 2015. Table 5 provides the percentage of people in each group comparing AES 2014 conference with AES 2015.



*Many participants valued the AES conference dinner and the dinner venue.*



*Table 5: Respondents' Self-rated Knowledge/Skills in Relation to Conduct and Use of Evaluation Comparison 2015 to 2014*

How would you describe your knowledge and skills in relation to the conduct and use of evaluation? Select one		
Answer Options	2014 Percent	2015 Percent
No background	0.0%	1.5%
Novice	10.0%	15.0%
Intermediate	39.0%	40.3%
Advanced	35.0%	34.0%
Expert	16.0%	9.2%
<b>answered question</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>206</b>
<b>skipped question</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>13</b>

*What sectors did conference attendees come from?*

The greatest number of respondents who responded to a question about which sector they came from identified government (either national/central and state/local government) as the sector where they had their main role in relation to evaluation (approximately 31%, n=64). The next highest response was 28% (n=58) identified themselves working in evaluation in private sector or consultancy firms, and 21.7% (n=45) in the community sector or not for profit organisations. Compared to the attendees in 2014, the percentage of conference attendees who came from the private sector has increased, while the percentage of those working in academia and the community sector/not for profit has decreased

*Table 6: Respondents' Main Role in Relation to Evaluation, Comparison 2015 to 2014*

Is your main role (in relation to evaluation) in...? Select one		
Answer Options	2014 Percent	2015 Percent
Community sector / not for profit organisation	24.2%	21.7%
Private sector / consultancy	24.2%	28.0%
University (including academics, students and non-academic staff)	19.2%	13.5%
Government - National/Central	14.1%	12.6%
Government – State/Local	13.1%	18.4%
Not applicable – not working or studying in any evaluation-related roles	0.0%	1.9%
Other (please describe)	5.1%	3.9%
<b>answered question</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>207</b>
<b>skipped question</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>

## 7.2 What were the reasons participants registered for the AES 2015 conference?

Key findings on the main reasons why participants registered for the AES 2015 were:

- To take advantage of the **networking opportunities**
- **The papers in the parallel sessions**
- The **location** (Melbourne).

Emerging reasons why participants registered included:

- They were **speaking or presenting at the conference**
- The **learning opportunities**.

Few participants indicated that “the cost of conference registration seemed like good value” was a key motivator for registering.

The main reasons the online survey respondents nominated to register for the AES conference were:

- networking (53.9%, n=118)
- the papers in the parallel sessions (43.8% nominated, n=96)
- the location (Melbourne) was attractive (39.3%, n=86)
- the keynote speakers seemed interesting (29.7%, n=65)

The lowest ranked reasons for registering were:

- the cost of the conference registration seeming like good value (7.3%, n=16)
- the cost of travel wasn't too high (15.5%, n=34)
- the timing fit well with other work/family/study commitments (19.2%, n=42).

Of those that nominated “Other” reasons for registering for the conference (34.7%, n=76), the open-ended responses were coded as follows:

*Table 7: Coding of “Other” Reasons for Registering for AES 2015*

What were your main reasons for attending the 2015 AES conference in Melbourne? Other:		
Coded responses	Response Percent	Response Count
Presenting a paper or workshop	30.3%	23
Learning opportunities	22.4%	17
Professional development	14.5%	11
Work requirement to attend, or work encouraged me to attend	7.9%	6
Because it was an AES conference	6.6%	5
Networking	5.3%	4
The conference program	3.9%	3
Always attend	2.6%	2
International Year of Evaluation	2.6%	2
Keynote speaker	2.6%	2
Evaluation student	1.3%	1
	<b>answered question</b>	<b>76</b>
	<b>skipped question</b>	<b>0</b>

These responses were largely, but not entirely, supported by the interviews undertaken on the conference floor. Interviews from the conference floor revealed a more nuanced range of reasons for conference registration than the online attendee survey. While networking was mentioned by a

number of those interviewed, the attraction of the keynote speakers and the location (Melbourne) were not mentioned as a reason for registering by those who participated in the one-on-one interviews. Presenting at the conference emerged as another key reason why participants chose to register, as did learning and professional development opportunities. A selection of responses given by interviewees illustrating these reasons that attendees registered for the conference is provided below.

### *Networking opportunities*

*I am studying for my Master of Evaluation in Melbourne. I'm just about to finish up and I'm **starting to look for work**, so it's partly about trying to learn from the experience of lots more experienced people than me, and also **networking opportunity**.*  
Evaluator based in Victoria

*I've been coming for the last umpteen-mumble years and it's a **really good networking opportunity** to see people I haven't seen for some years.*  
Evaluator based in New Zealand

### *Speaking or presenting at the conference*

*Well I was **presenting** so I had to register.*  
Evaluator who rated themselves as between advanced and expert

*I was **presenting**, so I guess that was a good reason. But it was really I come every year and enjoy it and use it as a **professional learning and development** opportunity.*  
Researcher from Victoria

### *Learning opportunities*

*This is my third in a row, so one was as a participant, the second one was an evaluator and this one really is, again, as a participant. I'm interested to see how things have changed. Partly for **networking**, I guess, and then partly to **build my practice of evaluation and learn about evaluation** and to contribute as a **speaker**, so I'm involved in two sessions.*  
Consultant based in Victoria

*I work in evaluation but I don't feel that I'm an expert evaluator **and I want to know more about evaluation**. One of the ways I decided to learn more about evaluation was to attend vocational conferences and to **be exposed to a range of methods and approaches** and experiences.*  
Self-rated intermediate evaluator based in Sydney

### *Examples of other reasons participants gave why they registered for AES 2015 in Melbourne:*

*I guess I was fortunate enough that **my company paid for it**, that's the particular reason why.*  
Evaluator from Victoria

***Well I come every year**. I didn't go last year for family reasons, but I've been coming every year for about seven or eight years. So it's just part of what I do.*  
Self-rated expert evaluator based in NZ

*So I **applied for a scholarship**, that's how I got here. Because I've just started this new health project and having it evaluated by [XXX]'s organisation I applied for the scholarship, I hurried in to get it so I can learn more about what evaluators do, what it's all about, you know.*  
Indigenous attendee from New Zealand

*The real reason, or two reasons, one is I am doing a PhD in evaluation, so I've got an interest obviously, but I guess my main reason is because I need to publish for my PhD and I was hoping that this would be an **avenue to get my work out there**.*  
Lecturer based in NSW

*I do a lot of work in evaluation as part of my position description and I just really came along to **hear what everyone else was doing** and **chat with people informally** in between sessions to see what they're doing that way as well.*

Victorian-based evaluator

*Also as a **benchmark** to see what headspace we're in, is what other people are talking about. If all these concepts are completely foreign to me then maybe we're not doing the right things or thinking in the right direction. So again, a bit of a benchmark and from a professional interest level as well.*

Attendee based in Brisbane



*Many participants valued the quality of the food at the conference, although some would have preferred more gluten free options and fresh salads.*

### 7.3 What were the reasons that non-participants did not register for the AES 2015 conference?

Key findings on why non-participants did not register for AES 2015 were:

- The **cost of attending** the AES 2015 conference in Melbourne, including the cost of registration and travel/accommodation
- Over half (54.2%) of those who responded to the non-attendee survey indicated they were **unlikely to attend** the AES conference in Perth in 2016.

Reducing the cost, improving the calibre of the keynote speakers, making the conference more practical and having higher quality presentations were the main factors that respondents suggested would make the next AES conference a 'must attend' event for them.

The key reasons given by those who responded to the online non-attendee survey for not attending the AES 2015 conference were:

- The cost of conference registration was too high (56.3%, n=27).
- They couldn't afford the time away from work/study/family (35.4%, n=17)
- The cost of travel was too high (including flights, accommodation) (33.3%, n=16)
- The keynote speakers were not interesting enough (22.9%, n=11).

Adding the cost of registration response to the cost of travel response, indicates that overall, the cost of attendance of the AES conference in Melbourne was the main barrier to attendance for the respondents of the non-attendee survey.

Sixteen (33.3%) of those who responded to the non-attendee survey indicated "Other". The most common reason given by this group was a clash with another event or scheduling issues. Importantly, in these open-ended "Other" responses, a further five indicated that cost was a key issue preventing attendance at the conference. Below are examples of respondents' open-ended comments from the online non-attendee survey:

- *I would have had to buy my own tickets - couldn't afford it right now.*
- *Related to the two point above. I'm in New Zealand and the cost of registration and workshops is high, especially with the exchange rate, even before travel and accommodation.*

This perception of the cost of the AES 2015 conference being too high was stated in the one-on-one interviews on the conference floor, and is discussed further below in section 7.5.

Of the 48 respondents to the AES 2015 non-attendee survey, the greatest number responded that either they "really wanted to go, but couldn't" (41.7%, n=20) or "kind of wanted to go, but didn't really mind missing out" (39.6%, n=19). Very few indicated that they "didn't want to go" (16.7%, n=8). Only one of the 48 respondents (2.1%) was not aware of the conference.

Conference non-attenders were asked "Do you expect you will go to the AES conference next year (2016), in Perth?", over half (54.2%, n=26) indicated in the negative: 39.6% (n=19) indicated they would "probably not" attend, while 14.6% (n=7) of respondents indicated they would "definitely not/highly unlikely" to attend the 2016 conference in Perth. In response to an open-ended question as to why they indicated the way they did, the greatest number who indicated in the negative suggested cost was an issue. A sample of these responses from the online non-attendee survey is provided below.

- *I am not sure if I can justify spending the money for registration and travel in relation to benefits from conference. I have looked at many of the presentations of interest from the 2015 conference that are available online*
- *Cost constraint*
- *Money*
- *Retired from work and cannot afford*
- *It is too expensive to get there from NZ*
- *The cost is too high for my income, but I understand that running a conference is expensive!*

- *The cost from NSW is significant both in term of flights, accommodation etc. but also the amount of time away from work with only two flights per day*
- *I live in Melbourne - work won't pay for flights, and I won't be able to afford it*
- *Registration cost is too high and travel costs will add to that*
- *Cost from NZ high, AES nice to have not core*
- *The cost of attending will probably be considered too high, but if I get a paper accepted for the conference I may be able to attend*
- *Will depend on work commitments at the time and cost of registration/travel/accommodation*

Other explanations given by these AES 2015 non-attendees, for the reasons given as to why they don't expect they will attend the AES conference in Perth, included:

- *May not be agreed by my employer. Would require paper to be accepted*
- *I'll wait until the conference is back on the east coast*
- *Not supported by my workplace*
- *AES conferences over the years have filled up the space with too many evaluation stories that are more about the evaluand than the evaluation, and from which the audience learns very little. They have also had too few 'meaty' presentations that show insight about the conduct of evaluation. In other words, experience has been that the benefits are not there to justify the cost.*

For those that indicated they were likely to attend the conference or were a 50/50 chance, the reasons given emphasised the location was the key reason for their attendance. A sample of these responses are:

- *Location is better than Melbourne. Will depend on dates, costs etc.*
- *I am in Perth*
- *I live an hour away from Perth. It will be a top priority for the year.*

In response to the question "What would make the AES conference a "must attend" event for you?", responses were grouped into several categories:

- *Making the conference less expensive*
- *Improved keynote speakers*
- *A greater emphasis on the practical, and*
- *Higher quality presentations.*

A selection of comments from the online non-attendee survey in each of these categories is presented below:

#### ***Making the conference less expensive***

- *Cost. Provide a rate for unpaid volunteers / unemployed same as full time student rate. As a unpaid volunteer trying to increase my skill in M&E while studying International Development part time and family responsibility the cost was prohibitive*
- *Sort the costs*
- *Less expensive*
- *If it were less expensive*
- *Pricing.*

#### ***Improved keynote speakers***

- *Have at least five key-note speakers with specific insights on evaluation method and organisation and encourage, through pre-conference sessions, practitioners to present new insights and lessons to*
- *Great keynote and lots of sessions with opportunity to interact and workshop in*
- *Great keynotes*
- *Standout keynotes, plus a rigorous program*
- *A keynote speaker of personal interest to me.*

### ***A greater emphasis on the practical***

- *Very practical, good transferable case studies, local and easy to participate*
- *Good coverage of international development issues, engaging with technology in evaluation, lots of practical rather than overly theoretical and naval gazing sessions*
- *Perhaps have something I can bring back ie a tool.*

### ***Higher quality presentations***

- *Guaranteed high quality presentations (some of the past presentations I've seen were quite disappointing)*
- *Less expensive, shorter, fewer low-grade presentations.*



*The lack of seating and small room sizes in some parallel sessions was raised by many participants as an issue with AES 2015.*

## 7.4 The value of the conference to participants

*Answering evaluation questions: Did conference participants find the conference valuable? If so, why? What elements of the conference were most valuable to participants?*

Key findings on whether the conference participants found the conference valuable, or not, and why:

- Approximately four-fifths (79%) of respondents either found the conference “**fairly valuable**” or “**extremely valuable**”.
- The percentage of respondents who found the conference “of some value, but not a great deal” has increased from 2014 to 2015.
- Respondents to the 2015 online attendee survey found the **learning** and **networking** opportunities, **the expertise and knowledge of presenters**, the **breadth and variety of presenters** and **the opportunity to present at the conference** as the most valuable elements of the conference.
- Additional elements the respondents to both the online survey and the one-on-one interviews were particularly impressed with or satisfied by included the **organisation of the conference**, the **food**, the **venue**, **Sched** (the conference app) plus **exposure to new concepts**.
- Presenters particularly valued the **IT and technology support** provided at the venue on the day, and many presenters commented on the high quality of the support provided to them by the AES.
- Of the social events and AES services provided, the various **plenary sessions** were seen as the most valuable of this group of conference elements, followed by the **AES International Awards Dinner** and then the **opening cocktail party**.

Almost half of conference attendees who responded to the online attendee survey found the conference “fairly valuable” (47%, n=103), with approximately one-third of survey respondents found it “extremely valuable” (32%, n=70). Twenty percent of survey respondents found it was “of some value, but not a great deal”. Only 0.9% indicated it as a “waste of time”.

*Table 8: Respondents Rating of the Value of AES 2015*

Overall, how valuable was the conference for you?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
It was extremely valuable	32.0%	70
It was fairly valuable	47.0%	103
It was of some value, but not a great deal	20.1%	44
It was a waste of time	0.9%	2
<b>answered question</b>		<b>219</b>
<b>skipped question</b>		<b>0</b>

Comparing these results to the same question in the 2014 online attendee survey, the proportion of respondents to 2014 survey who answered that “it was of some value, but not a great deal” has increased from 13.2% (n=14) in 2014 to 20.1% (n=44) in 2015.

This response aligns with the responses to a question in the online attendee survey about whether respondents were finding the AES conferences increasing in value, remaining about the same or decreasing in value. The majority of survey respondents in 2015 who responded to this question (53.1%, n=60) nominated that the conferences were remaining “about the same (no more or less valuable)”. Only 10.6% (n=12) who responded to the question, indicated that the conferences were becoming less valuable.

In regards to the specific elements of the conference that the respondents found most valuable, respondents were requested to select a maximum of three responses of a menu of 11 options. In order of ranking of most valuable to least valuable, conference attendees valued:



- Learning opportunities (67.6%, n=148)
- Networking opportunities (61.2%, n=134)
- Expertise and knowledge of presenters (40.2%, n=88)
- Breadth and variety of presenters (36.1%, n=79)
- The opportunity to present (28.3%, n=62)
- Camaraderie and inclusiveness (24.2%, n=53)
- One or more keynote speakers (20.5%, n=45)
- Leading edge ideas and innovations (15.5%, n=34)
- Other (5.5%, n=12)
- Interaction with keynote speakers (2.3%, n=5)
- Nothing, I didn't get anything from the conference (0.5%, n=1)

When requested to rate their satisfaction with different elements of the conference there are similar results. The respondents' answers to "How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the conference in each of these areas" are displayed in Figure 1. The results indicate that respondents were most satisfied (combining both "highly satisfied" and "satisfied" responses) by the "overall conference experience" and the "opportunity to interact with other participants" (both were of the same value, n=191, 87.2%), the "conference venue" (86.5%, n=186) and the "breadth of topics covered in the program" (84.5%, n=185).

### Participant satisfaction levels of conference elements 2015

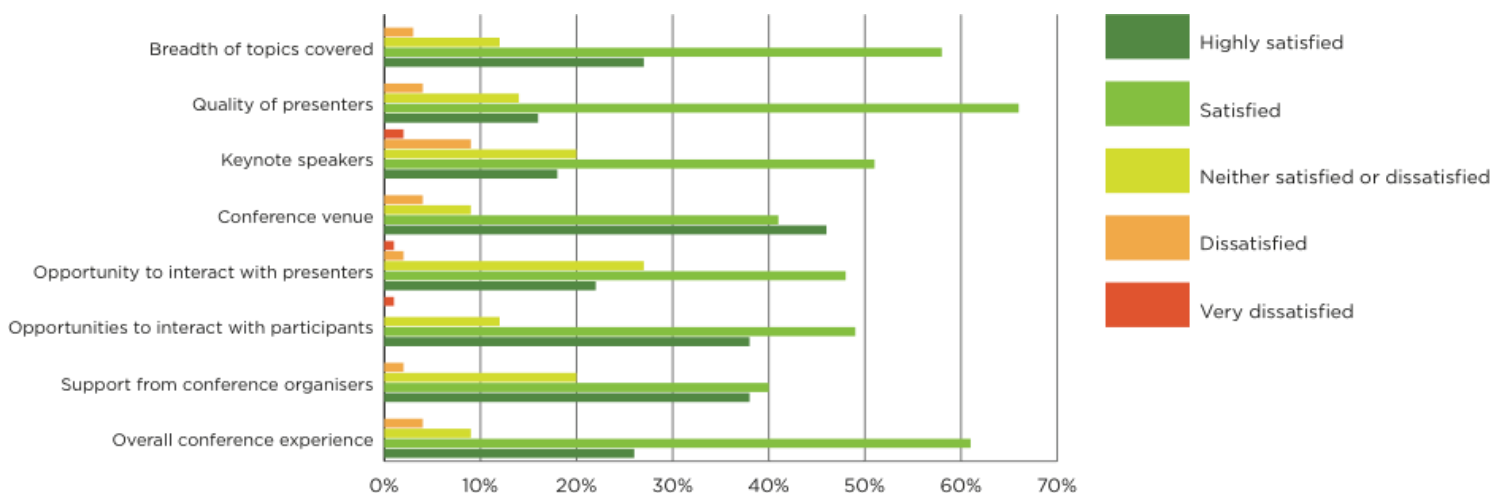


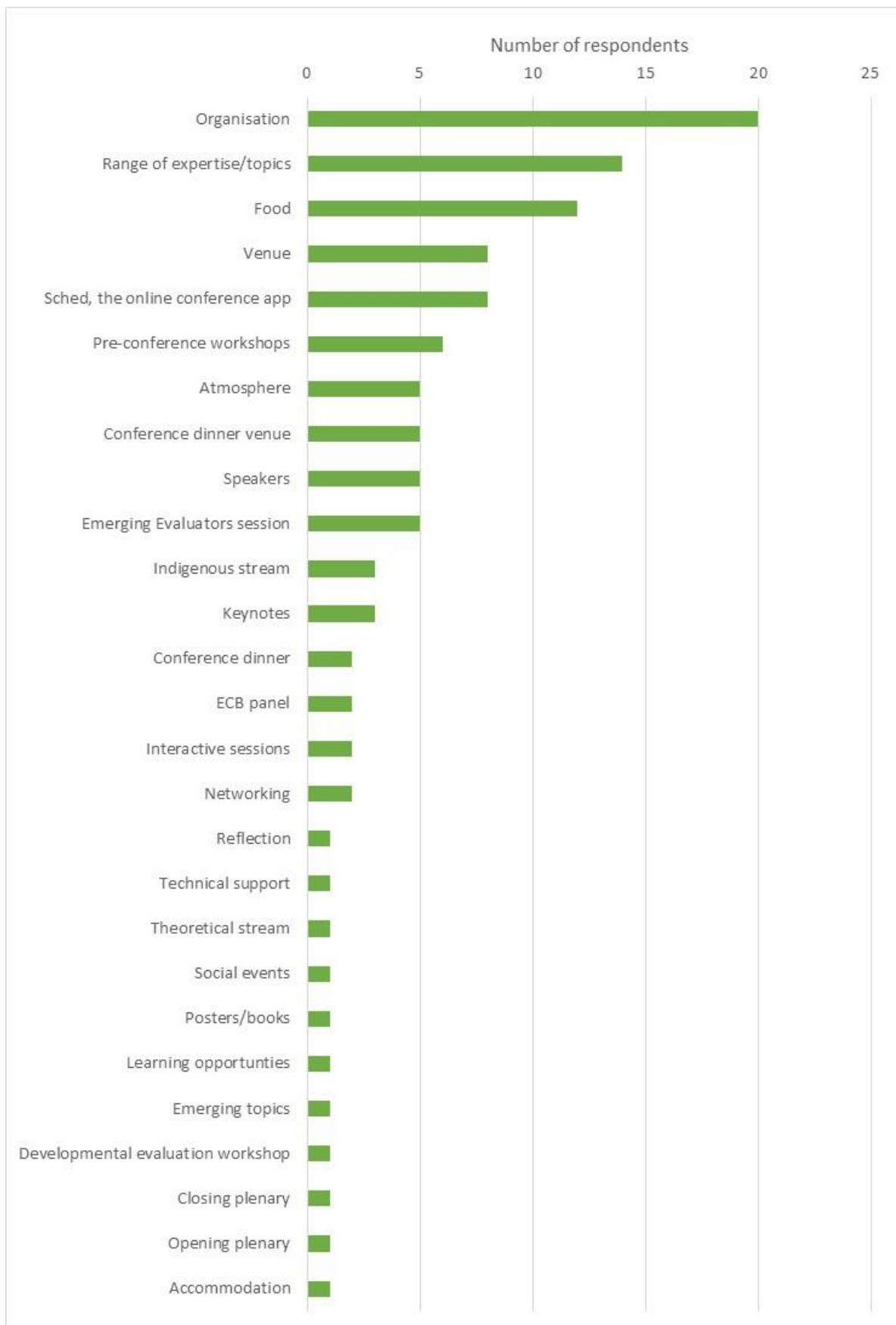
Figure 1: Participant Satisfaction Levels of Conference Elements 2015

To capture what respondents valued beyond the closed-question options provided for in the online attendee survey, there was an open-ended question in the survey which asked, "Apart from the factors listed above, please specify anything else that you were particularly satisfied with or impressed by?"

The 104 open-ended responses were coded and Figure 2 indicates the number of responses in each category. The highest responses were:

- Overall conference organisation (n=20)
- The range of expertise/topics (n=14)
- The food at the conference (n=12)
- The conference venue (n=8)
- Sched, the online conference app (n=8)
- Pre-conference workshops (n=6).

## What respondents were particularly satisfied with/impressed by



*Figure 2: Elements Respondents Nominated as Particularly Satisfying/Impressive in Open-Ended Responses*

A sample of respondents' comments from the online attendee survey supporting these additional elements of the conference which participants were particularly impressed with or satisfied by from are presented below:

#### *The overall conference organisation*

- *Organisation was excellent*
- *The management of the conference was top class*
- *Great organising to put it all together and have it all run very smoothly as there are many things that can go wrong, so perhaps with the exception of a few minor things, it went really well.*

Many of the one-on-one interviews on the conference floor also mentioned the quality of the conference organisation as a positive.

#### *The range of expertise/topics*

- *The breadth of topics covered in this conference was great, but also the depth at which they were covered. While there was a clear conference theme, it was great to see presenters utilise the theme to apply to so many different topics. It was also really nice to see so many of the issues facing the discipline and the profession being identified and debated*
- *The variety and number of interesting presentations*
- *I was impressed in the range of disciplines/perspectives of presenters this year - I think evaluation moving forward needs to embrace multiple perspectives and intergrate into multi-disciplinary teams and this conference is a great step towards that.*

#### *The food at the conference*

- *The food!*
- *Food was awesome*
- *The food was fantastic*
- *Catering was generous*
- *I thought the food was very good and loved the coffee stand.*

#### *The conference venue*

- *The venue was ideal*
- *The venue of the conference was great as it was in one place, therefore there was no need to worry about transport from one session to another. Very impressed and appreciative of the care & organisation of my conference timetable, accomodation, transport and excellent communication received which made things a whole lot easier for a first timer like me*
- *The venue was conducive to interactions.*

#### *Sched, the conference app and other social media/IT options*

- *The move to the digital age, with the scheduling app etc*
- *The online tool (SHED?) to organise my conference schedule*
- *Timetable ran smoothly, excellent communication via online email link to my seminar options and choices and daily program updates.*

The majority of those interviewed on the conference floor (22 out of 23) in Melbourne indicated that they were finding the conference valuable. A range of reasons were presented as to why they were finding the conference valuable, which align with the responses from the online survey. Key reasons why participants on the conference floor found the conference valuable include **networking**, **exposure to new concepts**, hearing from a **range of expertise and perspectives**.

## Networking

*I'm finding it valuable again from the perspective of finding out - **of meeting people, of making those connections** and **becoming inspired**. Secondly, of finding the areas of - the **gaps in knowledge**, particularly around how we use digital technology. So that is the particular interest, one of the best things I've gotten from the conference so far.*  
Self-rated novice evaluator from Victoria

*Yes I'm finding it valuable because I've already attended a couple of sessions that were stimulating and that I know that I'll follow up after the conference. That is, **I'll either use an idea that I heard** in the presentation, **or I'll follow up with the presenter** or someone I spoke to in the session. So in terms of have I got value for money yet, then that's pretty much what I had hoped to get out of the conference, so that's...*  
Independent evaluator and researcher, based in Sydney

## Exposure to new concepts

*Yes, it has been valuable because it's **exposed me to things outside what I would normally see in New Zealand** or I'd normally see in the work that I do which is mostly health services research. So I'm getting a wider view of what is out there in the evaluation world.*  
Indigenous researcher from New Zealand

*I definitely am finding it valuable. I have chosen sessions on purpose **to try and learn about things that I don't know anything about** and they've been really well presented and I've taken lots of notes about different types of evaluations and that's what I came here to learn and it's happening.*  
PhD candidate from Victoria

*I am finding it valuable, and the reasons for me saying that I think is that it's **opened my thought process** a lot if that makes sense. It's **caused me to challenge things that we do every day**. In Penny's session this morning talking about how we need to be careful about evaluating ourselves. So I think it has been valuable in terms of **guiding critical reflection about my practice**.*  
Self-rated intermediate evaluation knowledge and skills, researcher from Victoria

## Hearing from a range of perspectives

*I think I'm finding it valuable because I can see actually the **range of different perspectives** coming in. I found some presentations ... all the presentations were interesting because one gave a great snapshot of the different, I suppose, frames of thinking.*  
Consultant from Sydney

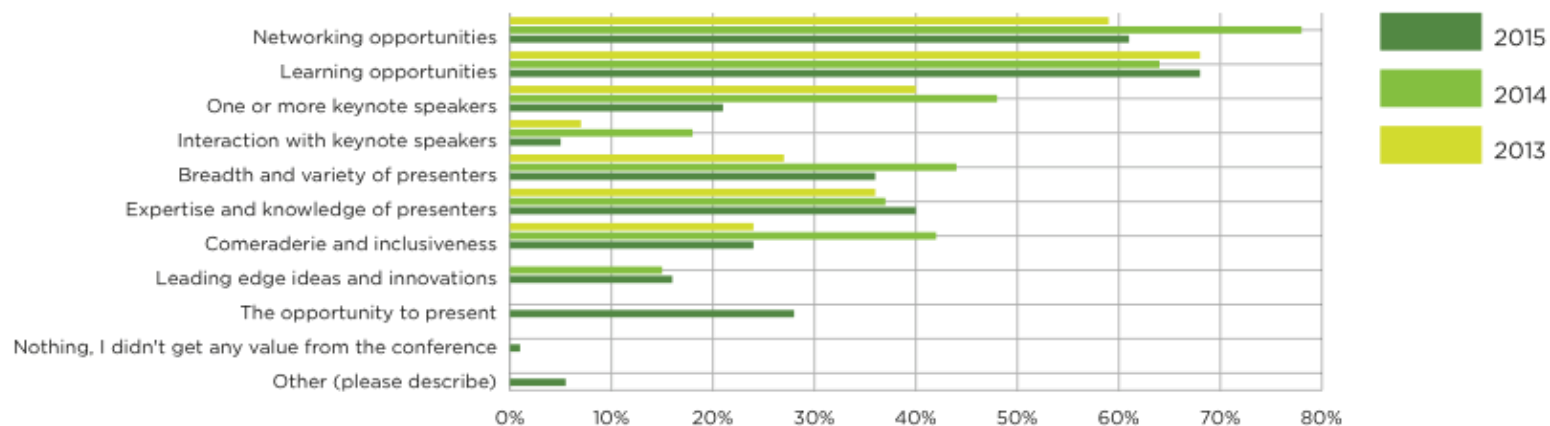
*I would say my valuable answer is yes, and it goes back to what I said earlier. I mean I think the ability to have **all these different perspectives** here is really great, and the change for conversation, to **reconnect with people** that are part of the evaluation committee that I don't get to see that often, and **make new connections** with people that are working on things of interest to me.*  
Evaluator who rated themselves as between advanced and expert

Comparison of data between online attendee surveys conducted in 2013, 2014 and 2015, Figure 3, indicates that the many elements that AES conference attendees' value of the conference has largely stayed stable over the three years, with the following exceptions:

- The ratio of survey respondents who valued the "keynote speakers" dropped from 48% of 2014 survey respondents, to 21% valuing this element in the 2015 conference attendee survey. This was also significantly lower than the 2013 rate of 40% of survey respondents valuing the keynote speakers in that year.
- The value that survey respondents placed on "networking opportunities" (61% nominated this as valuable in 2015) was in line with 2013 (59%), but was a drop from 2014, where 78% nominated it as valuable.

- Another significant change from 2014 was the proportion of respondents' who valued "camaraderie and inclusiveness", which dropped from 42% of respondents indicating this as one of the most valuable elements of the 2014 conference, to 24% in 2015.
- The "opportunity to present" was nominated by 28% of 2015 respondents as one of the three things they valued most about their experience of the AES conference, noting that this was a new answer option in 2015.

### Comparison of elements valued by respondents 2013, 2014 and 2015



*Figure 3: Comparison of Elements Valued by Respondents 2013, 2014 and 2015*

Figure 4 shows the results of a time series of the same questions asked over five years to gauge the satisfaction levels of respondents across a range of conference elements. The key points from Figure 4 are:

- Across the eight elements, the majority of respondents from all years were either "satisfied" or "highly satisfied" with those conference elements.
- The 2015 responses are lower than the 2014 responses in the "highly satisfied" response category across these major conference elements (except for "breadth of topics covered"), but significantly higher than the 2013 results (except for "keynote speakers").
- The 2015 responses have the highest "satisfied" responses across the conference elements "quality of presenters", "keynote speakers" and "overall conference experience" over the five years.
- With the exception of the conference in 2014, the proportion of those "highly satisfied" with keynote speakers is declining each year.

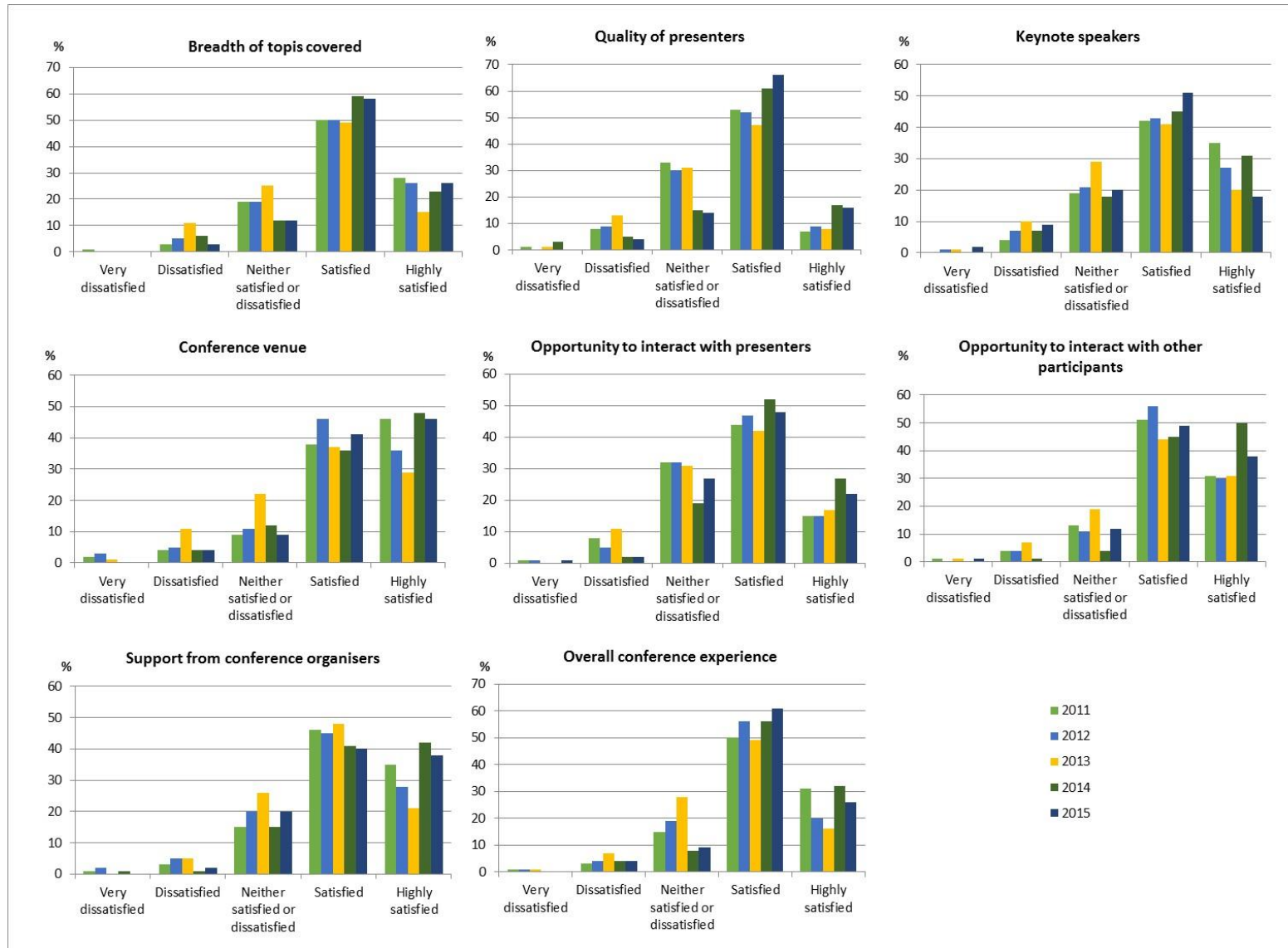


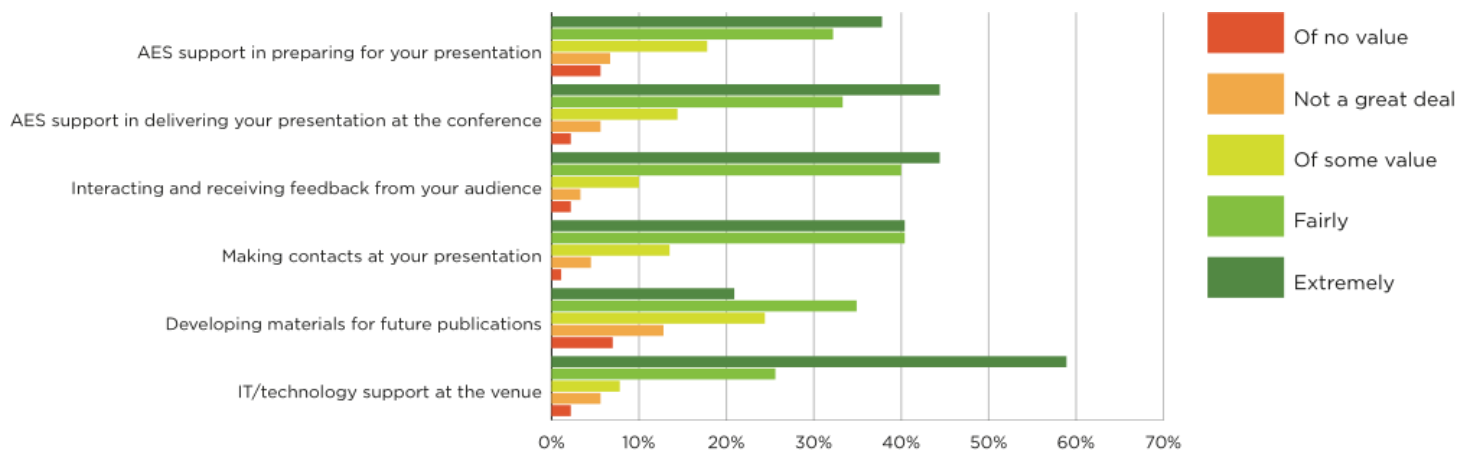
Figure 4: Comparison of Elements and Satisfaction Levels as Rated by Survey Respondents 2011-2015

### The value of the conference to presenters

Of the 219 respondents to the online attendee survey, 42.9% (n=94) indicated they presented at the conference. Of those who indicated the type of presentation they were involved in, the majority (63.3%, n=57) presented a short oral presentation (25 minutes).

Presenters at AES 2015 highly valued support they received at the conference, as indicated in Figure 5. They most valued IT and technology support at the venue (58.9%, n=53 “extremely” valued this, while 25.6% “fairly” valued the IT/technology support at the venue). They next valued equally “AES support in delivering your presentation at the conference” and “Interacting and receiving feedback from your audience” – both of these elements were “extremely” valued by 44.4% (n=40 each) of AES presenters responding to the survey who answered this question.

### Presenter value of support/elements of AES 2015



*Figure 5: Presenter Value of Support/Elements of AES 2015*

In the online attendee survey, 10 presenters commented that the support provided to them by AES was of a high standard:

- *The support that AES provided was really incredible. I'm not sure what kind of additional support could be provided*
- *IT support on the day was really good - but both my colleague and I picked up a bug on our data sticks from when we loaded up our presentations*
- *The support was excellent*
- *This worked fine for me*
- *It was fine. The notes for chairpersons were excellent*
- *It was just fine. Don't try to overdo it*
- *I think AES did everything possible - presenters need to take responsibility for their sessions, material etc*
- *None, support was excellent*
- *None it was totally fine and sufficient*
- *Nothing. I thought the support was superb.*

### Most valuable social events and conference activities/services

Of those survey respondents who answered a question about the value of the social events conference activities and services, the greatest perceived value came from the **plenary sessions** (34.4%, n=72, indicated they were “very valuable”, while 45.9%, n=96, responded they were “of some value”). The next ranked event was the **AES Conference Awards dinner**, with 23.7%, n=50, indicated it was “very valuable”, while 30.8%, n=65, responded it was “of some value”. Only 9% (n=19) indicated it was “not a great deal” or “of no value”. It is important to note that 36.5% of respondents to this question did not attend the dinner. The next most valued was the **Opening cocktail party**, which 18.6% of respondents (n=39) found “very valuable” and 21% (n=44) indicated

was “of some value”, while 56.7% (n=119) did not attend. The sponsor exhibit booths were found to be “very valuable” by 12.4% (n=26), while exactly half (50%, n=105) of the respondents who answered this question found the sponsor exhibit booths “of some value”.

Out of the social media and IT options provided by the conference, Sched (the conference app), was utilised by 57.9% (n=121) of respondents who answered this question, while 66% (n=138) indicated they utilised the conference webpage.

*Table 9: Respondents Use of Social Media or IT Options for AES 2015*

Did you use any of the following social media or IT options for the Melbourne 2015 conference?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Twitter – followed others tweets	18.2%	38
Twitter – tweeted about the conference	13.4%	28
Conference webpage	66.0%	138
Conference mobile web application 'Sched' - utilised My Sched and/or downloaded the Sched app	57.9%	121
Conference mobile web application 'Sched' - used survey button to rate individual sessions	10.5%	22
Facebook – followed the conference page	11.0%	23
Facebook – posted about the conference	6.2%	13
Daily news email	21.5%	45
Blogs – followed others	1.4%	3
Blogs – wrote a blog	1.9%	4
No, didn't use any	16.3%	34
<b>answered question</b>		<b>209</b>
<b>skipped question</b>		<b>10</b>



## 7.5 What elements of the conference were least valuable to participants?

Elements that the respondents found least valuable, were unimpressed with or were dissatisfied by for AES 2015 were:

- The **room sizes** and **lack of seating**, some or all of the **keynote speakers** and the **varying quality of presentations**.
- Least valuable events or ancillary services were the **live captioning** of the conference sessions and the poster presentations, although more people found these of value than not.
- The least used social media or IT options for the conference were **blogs**, the **Facebook page** and the **star rating survey button** within Sched (the conference app), to rate individual presentations within a session.

The respondents to the online survey were provided with an opportunity to nominate in an open-ended response option what they were particularly dissatisfied by or disappointed with, and the results were coded. The results are presented in Figure 6.



*Many of the respondents indicated some of the rooms for the conference were too big, while others were too small.*

## What respondents were particularly dissatisfied by/disappointed with?

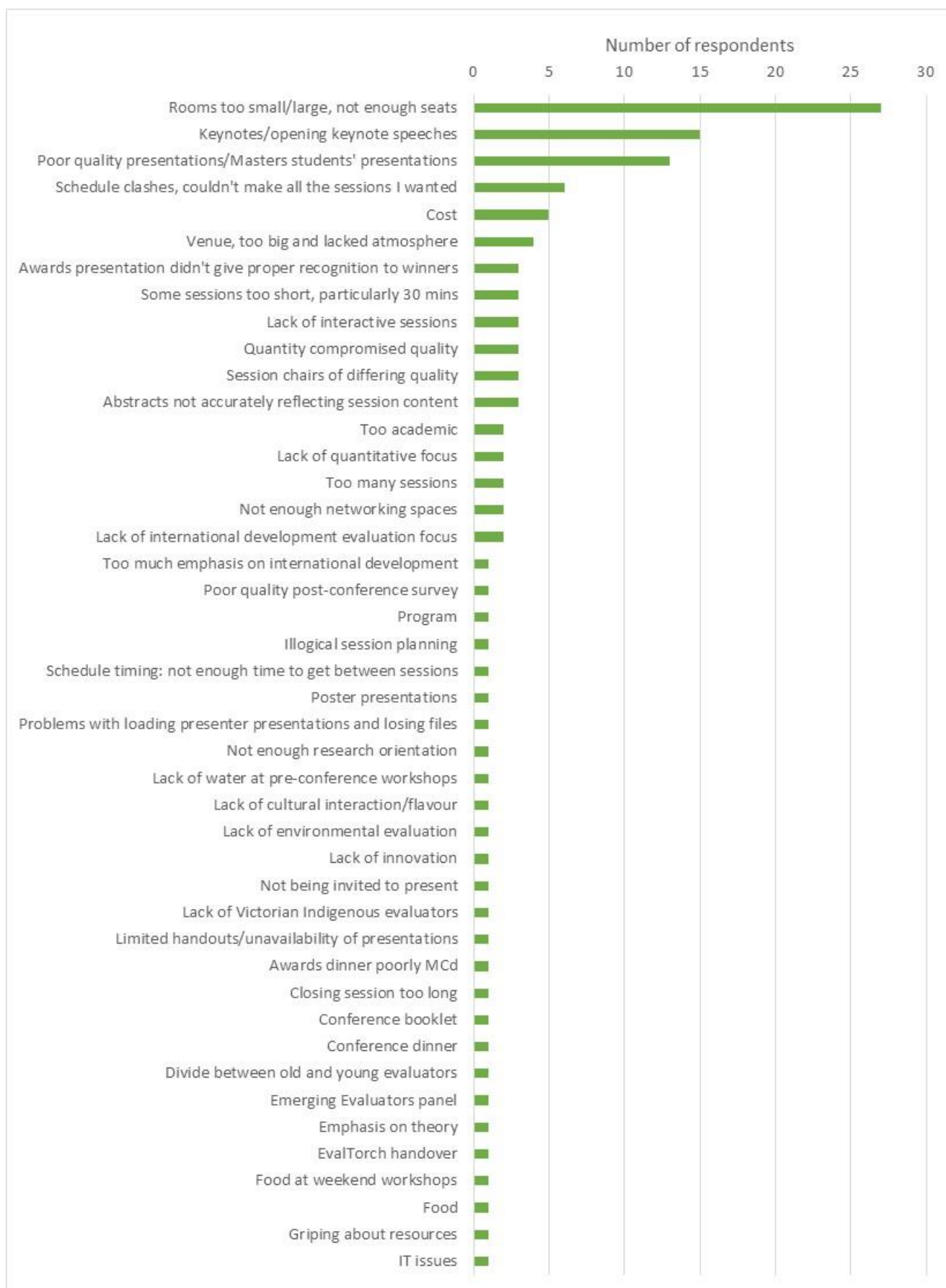


Figure 6: Elements Respondents Nominated as Particularly Dissatisfying/Disappointing for AES 2015 in Open-Ended Responses

The largest response was a dissatisfaction with **room sizes and the lack of seating**. This extended to some rooms being perceived to be too large (particularly for the Indigenous stream) or too small (particularly for the skills-based stream). The issue was highlighted by both respondents to the online attendee survey and the one-on-one interviews on the conference floor. Twenty-seven respondents, out of 117 (23%) who answered the question in the online attendee survey about what they were dissatisfied by/disappointed with, nominated room sizes and/or lack of seating at the issue. A selection of the responses on this topic from the online survey are below:

- *I appreciate it is a challenge, but there were sessions I couldn't get into as the room was so crowded*
- *I thought that room sizings were not ideal. The main room appeared too large and everyone tended to sit up the back and then some of the well-known speakers were in small rooms where audience members had to stand*
- *I think there was an opportunity to use the online scheduling app to improve the way that rooms were allocated. I attended several presentations where I had to stand whilst concurrent sessions had over 50 empty chairs. MySched has the potential to correct this*
- *Rooms were too small for many practical sessions e.g. Rm 108. Other rooms too large with presenters "lost" & distant*
- *The room for Indigenous presenters (main one) was far too big. Should have been thought about. Venue was way too big*
- *Some of the session rooms were too small for the number of people wishing to participate, meaning that standing or sitting on the floor was necessary*
- *Some of the presentations placed in the smaller rooms had high attendance while other larger rooms were under utilised*
- *I thought the chairs were too hard and the rooms too crowded.*

This was mentioned in the comments from the conference floor in the one-on-one interviews:

*I don't know if you'd call it least valuable but it's probably the thing that I've least enjoyed - I'm not quite sure if that's the right thing. But just from my personal experience, those practical sessions needed bigger rooms and more time. The least valuable thing was that it could have been another 10 or 15 minutes for a couple of those sessions. That was where we were just starting to - instead of it being rushed in those practical sessions, they could have done with a bit more time and space for the practical sessions. And flipside of that is a policy session in a great big room with 10 people sitting in it and an hour and a half to talk about it, when the value for me would have been in extending some sessions. That's a very personal focus in that I wanted that practical stuff. But I found that yesterday and I found that today too, the same thing coming up. Time and space I suppose.*  
Attendee based in Brisbane

*I went to go to an – up in Room 108 and it was absolutely packed out. We couldn't get in so we went elsewhere. So I guess that was about the size of room for reflecting the people who were presenting it and how many people came. Then we were in a plenary session in there and it was so huge from the amount of people so I'm not sure how you get that right.*  
Indigenous researcher from New Zealand

From the close-ended question options provided in the online attendee survey rating the levels of satisfaction with key conference elements, the element that attracted the **highest levels of dissatisfaction** (Figure 1, above) was the **keynote speakers** with 10.7% (n=23) who responded to this question either "very dissatisfied" (1.9%, n=4) or "dissatisfied" (8.8%, n=19). This element had over double the dissatisfaction levels than the next highest element on the dissatisfaction scale (venue, 4.2% n=9 were either "dissatisfied or "very dissatisfied"). This dissatisfaction with some or all of the keynote speakers is reflected in the open-ended survey responses to the question, "Apart from the factors listed above, please specify anything else that you were particularly disappointed with / dissatisfied by". Fifteen respondents made comments about this in the open-ended responses, and a sample are:

- *Most of the keynote speakers - Not engaging, too much Powerpoint*
- *Keynote speakers were disappointing*

- *Compared to previous years I was a bit disappointed by the keynote speaker presentations, however, this is more a reflection of the extremely high quality in previous years, rather than this years' keynote speakers per se*
- *The key notes were very disappointing this year! where where the international leaders in the field. I know Penny and Patricia are great -- but they are known to us. It seemed to lack real gravitas this year.*
- *Key notes were not very inspiring and poor choices*
- *I would have liked the keynotes to be a bit more provocative, challenging.*

This disappointment with some or all of the keynote speakers is reflected in comments made in the interviews conducted on the conference floor. When asked what elements of the conference they were finding least valuable, some interviewees responded:

*I can sometimes find keynote addresses and so forth, I feel quite removed from those sessions, I find them quite a passive experience I think.*

Victorian-based evaluator

*I've found a couple of the keynotes least valuable, because I think they weren't actually doing - weren't presenting new information or making you think, which I think that's the job of a keynote, is to - while John Hattie was certainly provocative, he was provocative for the sake of being provocative, not because of the work he's doing, and there was very little about evaluation in it.*

Evaluator based in New Zealand

*I have to say most of the plenary sessions have gone not straight over my head but I just haven't found them interesting, and I think... I just don't think they've spoken very well. It's hard to sit in a room for an hour and listen to somebody speak unless they're engaging and I haven't found them very engaging. So you know some of the subject matter is interesting it is just a long time to sit and listen.*

Intermediate evaluator (self-assessed) based in Victoria

A third element that attracted many comments was the **poor quality of some of the presentations**, including that Master's students presentations were not clearly identified as such in the program. A selection of examples of comments on this element from the online attendee survey is included below.

- *Disappointed with the quality of presentations, both in content which was not always novel and with the quality of the presentations. A large number did not use effective presentation techniques, often had far too much on slides and many said - sorry you can't read what is on the slide. I really expect more sophisticated presentations from people who present information to clients regularly*
- *Lack of rigorous presentations*
- *Speakers should not be just standing up the front reading out loud from their papers. We come to the conference to hear them speak. If they are just going to read from a paper, why wouldn't attendees just stay at home and read the paper themselves?*
- *Master's students presenting "work in progress" that was presented in the abstract as far more interesting than it actually was.*
- *Some of the speakers were masters students and this should have been a bit clearer in the guide. Perhaps a half day set aside for this as they did not have as much to offer (was more a presentation of their methodology) as other presenters but could not be easily gauged from reading abstract in guide.*

This issue was also mentioned on the conference floor by an interviewee:

*Then a couple of them were a bit disappointing in a way. I got a feeling it's partly because the organisation is at a critical stage of growth and you get a lot of people doing a paper just to get here, and I wonder whether the editorial group are being as rigorous as they might be, or whether they had space to fill and they just leant on a few people to do something.... Least valuable, well I guess I think some of the papers I felt didn't take me very far.*

Attendee from the community sector in Victoria.

Figure 7 provides a representation of survey respondents' responses to a series of statements about the conference. Some of the issues that have been highlighted in this section are reinforced by the data in the figure. For example, 2015 provided the highest negative response in the past three years to the statement "Keynote speakers provided new perspectives and challenged your thinking": 5.3% (n=11) who answered the question responded to this statement "Hardly any/none" while 17.9% (n=37) responded to "Not many". Only 6.3% (n=13) responded that "All" keynote speakers provided new perspectives/challenged thinking, compared to around 15% answering "All" in 2013 and 2014.

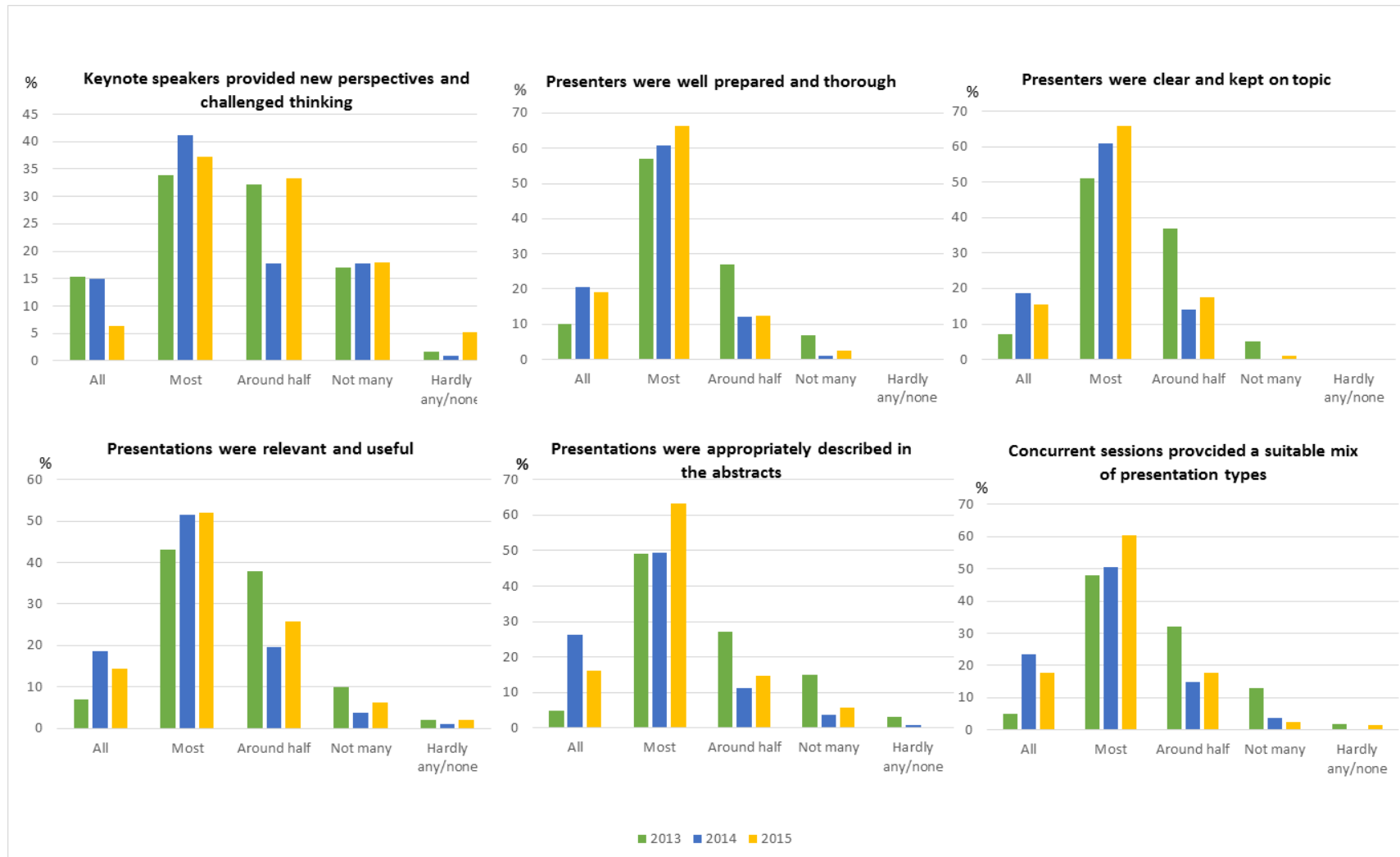
Similarly, for the statement "Presentations were appropriately described in the abstracts", 16.2% (n=34) responded to this statement with "All", which is a drop from the proportion who responded in the same way in 2014 (26%), but markedly up on 2013, with only 5% of those respondents answering "All" in that year's post-conference survey.

Figure 8 provides a comparison of the respondents' perception of skills and knowledge gained from the conference across eight "skills and knowledge" statements, comparing 2013, 2014 and 2015. Compared to 2014, all eight skills and knowledge areas experienced a decline the percentage of respondents' who nominated that they had gained "Substantial" new knowledge or skills across the eight statements. Although, the 2015 responses were overall an improvement on the 2013 results.

When the data from Figure 8 is analysed based on experience levels of respondents, there was a substantial difference between the level of knowledge gained by those who self-assessed as advanced/expert evaluators (a lower proportion thought they had gained substantial knowledge/skills), compared with those that self-assessed as novice or intermediate evaluators (a higher proportion considered they had gained substantial knowledge/skills). For example, in response to the statement "to what extent did the conference provide you with the following:" for "New knowledge or understanding in your field of practice (such as education, health or social services)" the overall percentage who nominated that the conference provided them with "Substantial" knowledge/skills was 21.4% (n=45). However, only 5.3% (n=1) of those who responded with "Substantial" were expert evaluators, and 11.6% (n=8) were advanced, while 29.3% (n=24) of those who nominated "Substantial" were intermediate evaluators, and 32.2% (n=10) were novice. A similar result occurred for the statements: "New knowledge or understanding from outside your field of practice"; "Awareness of new research/evaluation approaches"; "Understanding of the value and use of evaluation methodology" and "Research/evaluation skills". In sum, experienced evaluators are not gaining new skills and knowledge from the conference as much as less experienced evaluators.

Many of these issues also arose in a participatory evaluation exercise conducted on the third day of the conference by consultant evaluator and conference presenter Vanessa Hood. Ms Hood conducted an exercise called "45" which involved responding to the question "how could the AES conference be improved?" and then having each participant conduct a series of ratings to come up with an accumulated score for each issue (the highest being the top priority to improve). While this session involved only 11 conference delegates (all women) plus Ms Hood, it does support the findings above from the attendee survey. The issues raised in from the highest to the lowest were:

1. Include more participatory sessions
2. More chairs in rooms 107 and 108
3. Really good keynotes
4. More indigenous input with a view to more indigenous participation
5. More balanced participation of natural resource/environmental scientists as speakers rather than domination by those in human/social sciences
6. Room sizes to cater for participants, auditorium too big for some sessions, rooms too small for others
7. Have a venue where there are more intermediate sized rooms (plenary auditorium too big; little rooms too pokey)
8. More transferrable lessons from sessions, less of 'my program did X'
9. Workshops don't always reflect the abstract (~ 25%) – work on this
10. Perhaps some sessions focussed solely on showcasing exemplary evaluations ie highlighting different evaluation methods done well
11. More information about skills development and XXX development for evaluations at all levels
12. Communication to presenters more sessions/discussion formats on skills/issues



*Figure 7: Comparison of Conference Session Statements 2013, 2014 and 2015*



Figure 8: Comparison of Skills and Knowledge Gained 2013, 2014 and 2015

### Least valuable aspects of the conference for presenters

The AES 2015 presenters who responded to the online attendee survey least valued “developing materials for future publications” (see Figure 5). This component of their AES 2015 experience was nominated by 7% (n=6) of AES presenter respondents who answered this question as “of no value” and by 12.8% (n=11) as “of little value”. Overall, presenters who responded to the online attendee survey valued the support provided by AES, but did have some specific comments for improvements, including:

#### **Better feedback on abstracts or presentations**

- *Opportunity for feedback for relatively new evaluators relating to abstract. Was expecting to receive feedback on why abstract was not accepted for presentation and time set for this to occur, but it did not transpire. This would have been very useful for personal development and future abstracts*
- *It might have been helpful to receive the reviewer's feedback on the abstract to understand the value*
- *It would be good to get the feedback if people completed the survey after the presentation.*
- *Techniques other than 10 minutes for questions for presenters to enable discussions and peer learning after the presentations*
- *I would have liked more motivation to develop my presentation as a paper for the AES journal. Whilst only one prize can be given why not consider runners up being announced and published.*

#### **Improved preparation for chairs, or more professional chairing of sessions**

- *The chair for my session was very poor, awkward and disoriented*
- *As a Chair, I was disappointed that the Bio's for me to introduce the speakers weren't there - not a drama, but slack*
- *Find people committed to chairing the sessions as expected*

#### **IT improvements**

- *Online 'drop box' for conference presentations to avoid having to do it on the day*
- *Business centre should have had printer*
- *Perhaps to be more proactive in IT area - I saw a few messes and uncoordinated response to technology not working*
- *Having capacity to see notes while presenting power points would have been good*
- *An office or area to prepare for presentations that was not for the sole purpose of uploading presentation files.*

#### **Miscellaneous**

- *Consideration of walking distances for people with less mobility and having some mobility devices available - not wheelchairs*
- *I suggest that lanyards be colour coded to match conference streams so that delegates can more easily identify people they may want to approach and connect with. Also would be helpful to include clue as to subject area/sector of presentation titles e.g. education, health, social services, environment etc*
- *I think some exemplars of previous presentations could be filmed and provided online to provide guidance to presenters.*

Presenters also had suggestions for some of the issues that the broader conference cohort raised: room sizes, scheduling of sessions clashing and lack of seating. These have been discussed in the previous section.



### Least valuable social events and ancillary conference activities/services

Of the social events and ancillary conference activities and services, many respondents to the online survey reported that they did not attend or utilise these services. Of the respondents who answered a question about the value of these ancillary conference services:

- 92.8% (n=193) did not attend the first timers' breakfasts
- 87.0% (n=181) reported that they did not attend "social activities (such as trivia, bingo and morning walks)"
- 81.3% (n=169) did not attend the AES AGM.

Those that did attend these events or engaged in the services found the following events/activities the least useful:

- Live captioning of plenary session was seen as "of no value" by 21.4% of respondents (n=45) and "not a great deal" of value by 18.1% (n=38) by respondents who answered this question. Nevertheless, a higher proportion of those who responded to the question found that the captioning was either "very valuable" (16.2%, n=34) or "of some value" (32.4%, n=68).
- The poster presentation session was seen as "not a great deal" of value or "of no value" by 22.3% of people who responded to this question (n=47). However, again a higher percentage found it "very valuable" (5.2%, n=11) or "of some value" (35.5%, n=75).

The least-used social media or IT options for the conference were blogs (1.4%, n=3, for following others' blogs; 1.9%, n=4, for writing a blog), Facebook (6.2%, n=13, posted on Facebook about the conference; 11%, n=23, followed the conference Facebook page) and the star rating survey button within Sched to rate individual presentations within sessions (10.5%, n=22). Sixteen percent (n=34) of those who responded to this question did not use any social media options at the conference.

The Sched option to star rate (from one to five stars) individual presenters' presentation within a session on "delivery" and "content" (using the "Wufoo" online form builder), was not embraced by the conference attendees. In total, with over 115 presentations across 61 sessions, a total of 117 Wufoo star rating responses were received, averaging about one rater per presentation:

- Forty-five presentations had a single person rating them on Wufoo
- Fifteen presentations had two people rating them
- Eight presentations had three people using the Wufoo rating survey
- Two presentations had four Wufoo survey responses
- One presentation (the opening plenary) had eight Wufoo responses.

These response rates are too low to be useful.

Of those that did respond to the star rating of presentations within a session, the relative majority (39.1%, n=43, out of 110 responses) rated those sessions "Delivery" as four stars out of five and "Content" as five stars out of five (37.0%, n=40 out of 108 responses).

## 7.6 Do participants perceive they are likely to change their evaluation practice in any way as a result of attending the conference? If so, how?

Key findings on whether participants perceived that they would be likely to change their evaluation practice in any way as a result of attending the conference are:

- Close to two-thirds (61.6%) of survey respondents indicated they would be **likely to change their evaluation practice** as a result of attending the conference.
- Many of these indicated that they would use, adopt or have an increased understanding of a specific skill or approach, including **evaluation capacity building, logic models/maps, data-visualisation** and **sense-making**.
- Others made general comments about incorporating approaches or new ideas into their practice.
- Others indicated they would incorporate further elements gained from the conference such as improved **evaluation planning, commission and management**, specific approaches for engaging with **Indigenous evaluators/communities**, the use of **technology** in evaluation and increased **attention to theory**.

Participants of the online attendee survey were asked if they were likely to change their evaluation practice in any way as a result of attending the conference. The majority indicated they would, with 61.6% (n=135) of the online attendee survey answering positively to this question and 36.5% (n=80) indicating they were not likely to change their practice as a result of attending the conference. Four respondents (1.8%) did not answer this question. A similar proportion of the 23 conference attendees interviewed on the conference floor indicated they were not likely to change their evaluation practice as a result of attending the conference (34.8%, n=8).

Respondents to the online attendee survey who indicated they were likely to change their practice were asked to elaborate on this in an open-ended response, and 116 responses were received. Table 10 summarises and classifies these responses.

*Table 10: Respondents' Perception of How They Will Change Their Evaluation Practice as a Result of Attending AES 2015*

Type of change in practice	Specific examples provided
Use/adoption/understanding of a specific skills or approach (31 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation Capacity Building (7 mentioned)</li> <li>• Logic models/maps (5 mentioned)</li> <li>• Data visualisation (3 mentioned)</li> <li>• Sense-making (4 mentioned)</li> <li>• Photovoice (2 mentioned)</li> <li>• M&amp;E Frameworks (2 mentioned)</li> <li>• Roundtable reporting (2 mentioned)</li> <li>• Julian King's value for investment (2 mentioned)</li> <li>• Developmental evaluation</li> <li>• Ditching the 100 pager</li> <li>• Cascading M&amp;E Frameworks</li> <li>• Facilitation skills</li> <li>• Social Return on Investment</li> <li>• Most Significant Change</li> <li>• Participatory techniques</li> <li>• Partnership rubric survey</li> <li>• Qualitative methods</li> <li>• Value for money</li> </ul>
Utilising or being aware of unspecified tools, approaches or methods (16 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilising or being aware of some tools, approaches or methods, but these were not specified (mentioned by 16)</li> </ul>
Gained new ideas (13 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gaining new ideas about evaluation (mentioned by 13 – many mentioned these new ideas would be incorporated into their work)</li> </ul>
Enhanced/clarified/increased understanding of evaluation practice (6 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General clarification or enhanced understanding of evaluation (mentioned by 5)</li> <li>• Increased understanding of evaluative thinking</li> </ul>
Incorporate general learnings (8 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unspecific responses about overall or general learnings from the conference</li> </ul>
Improved evaluation planning, commissioning, management (5 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased use of formative evaluations, not just summative</li> <li>• Managing external evaluations</li> <li>• Understanding specific evaluation components, and conducting a large-scale evaluation</li> <li>• Better planning of evaluations</li> <li>• Integrate evaluation earlier in program management</li> </ul>
Approaches to evaluations involving Indigenous people (4 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hearing from Indigenous people about issues working with evaluators</li> <li>• More aware of issues of working with Indigenous communities</li> <li>• Better understanding of working with Indigenous and CALD communities</li> <li>• More motivated to form partnerships with Indigenous evaluators</li> </ul>
Use of new technology (3 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social networks</li> <li>• Twitter</li> </ul>
Paying increased attention theory in evaluation (2 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure methods and approaches align with theory</li> <li>• Be clearer about underlying theories and approaches</li> </ul>

Other (28 respondents)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being more inclusive in evaluation (2 mentioned)</li> <li>• Utilise networks more (2 mentioned)</li> <li>• Increased openness (2 mentioned)</li> <li>• Not having other data on a USB with presentation on it when speaking at a conference</li> <li>• Undertake a more rigorous value for money assessment prior to sending delegates to future conferences</li> <li>• Being more mindful of different viewpoints</li> <li>• Increased methodological accuracy</li> <li>• More rigour</li> <li>• Linking evaluations to strategic planning</li> <li>• Share knowledge gained with colleagues</li> <li>• Being more inclusive in evaluation (disability)</li> <li>• Confirmed existing convictions</li> <li>• Addressing political sensitivities upfront</li> <li>• Understanding the changing nature of evaluation</li> <li>• Aim higher</li> <li>• Reassess desire to stay in evaluation</li> <li>• Careful checking of keynotes and facilities for next conference</li> </ul>
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Interviewees on the conference floor gave various responses as to how they might change their evaluation practice, many of which corresponded to the information in Table 10.

*Yes indeed. I'm going to know more about what it is that I'm after, and I'm going to do a lot more thinking before I start worrying about engaging people. I'm going to build our own internal capacity so that we're not as reliant on external evaluators, and I'm going to say to my people - because we're in education it's so hard to do - we did this change and this led to.*  
Attendee from the government sector

*Yes. I don't know, not of the project that I'm doing right now because that's already been established but I think in future I'll put more weight on qualitative data than I did before and that's where I'm going to some of the sessions here.*  
Student from Victoria

*Yes but the issue is with my current position I don't know if I have the freedom to do that. Well I would definitely be more involved in you know when a client comes and they tell you okay we want to do this evaluation, I would try to build this again like the logic model and you know what are the mechanisms and try to have some qualitative knowledge to help my quantitative analysis, like trying to find what are the indicators and signals.*  
Researcher from NSW, who identified their knowledge and skills in relation to evaluation as a novice

A sample of comments from those interviewed on the conference floor who indicated they were unlikely to change their practice include:

*Not change it. I think it's just enhanced it, made me aware of more things like what books are available.*  
Indigenous researcher from New Zealand.

*Because some of the things I've been hearing are just reinforcing the sorts of work I do. I work a lot with Pacifica and Māori and the papers that we've been hearing about, that just reinforces the fact that we're along the - of course you can always improve what you're doing, so I'm not suggesting that I'm doing anything perfectly. I'm just saying that what I've heard is reinforcing we're on the right track.*  
Evaluator based in New Zealand.



*Some respondents indicated that they felt the conference dinner did not give appropriate recognition to the recipients of the AES Awards for Excellence in Evaluation.*

## 7.7 How could the AES International Evaluation Conference be improved in the future?

This evaluation report has highlighted the significant value that the Australasian evaluation community places on the AES International Evaluation Conferences. This is reflected by the support that the evaluation community gives these conferences: approximately two-fifths of the online survey respondents who answered this question indicated they would either “definitely/highly likely” or “probably” attend the AES conference in Perth in 2016 (41.3%, n=88). A further 30% (n=64) indicated their attendance would be a “50/50 chance”. However, 61 respondents (28.6%) said they would either “probably not”, “definitely not/highly unlikely” attend the AES 2016 conference in Perth. Six respondents skipped this question.

It is with these responses in mind, and the responses of over half of non-attendee survey respondents who indicated they were unlikely to attend Perth in 2016, that this section addresses how the AES conferences can be improved in the future. This report has highlighted several areas for potential improvement for future conferences, particularly for Perth in 2016.

These key areas of improvement are:

- Showcasing more high-profile, international and challenging keynote speakers
- Focusing on parallel presentations of quality over quantity
- Improving room allocations and seating arrangements
- Lowering the cost of conference registration
- Increasing the opportunity for networking.

These are each discussed below.

### Keynote speakers

Across the conference attendee survey, the non-attendee survey and the one-on-one interviews on the conference floor, the profile, calibre and relevance of some of the keynote speakers was raised as an issue. While many attendees indicated that several of the keynote speakers were challenging and interesting, a substantial number of the AES conference participants are seeking a suite of high-profile, challenging and relevant international and Australasian keynote speakers who are on the cutting edge of evaluation theory and practice. As the respondents said:

- *Higher level keynotes - more about evaluations place in the world, less specific to a discipline.*  
Respondent to online attendee survey
- *As I said, this conference may have - I'm not sure - a few fewer of what I'd call global thought leaders, but I think that's the essential thing as a draw for this kind of conference, you want to think that for that really rather considerable amount of money for me as a freelancer, I want to know that I'm - not necessarily going to be rubbing shoulders with, but hearing what are the thoughts and experiences of the people whose writing and whose work is leading the field.*  
One-on-one interview on the conference floor
- *Standout keynotes, plus a rigorous program.*  
Respondent to the online non-attendee survey, in response to the question “What would make the AES conference a “must attend” event for you?”

Attracting higher-profile international keynote speakers, to complement the Australasian keynotes, will make the event more attractive to those who did not attend and more relevant and challenging to those who did. Offering one or two international ‘star’ keynote speakers is likely to be a major drawcard for future conferences, attract more registrations and lead to higher participant satisfaction ratings.

### Quality over quantity

Both non-attendees and attendees alike mentioned that there was variable quality among the papers – with some being high quality and some being less so. Several respondents across the interviews, online attendee survey and non-attendee survey mentioned that there should be fewer presentations, of higher quality. There were also concerns raised about poor presentation skills of some presenters (reading directly from slides or their paper, font on slides being too small, leaving no time for questions) and some underprepared session chairs. Several presenters were also expecting feedback on their abstracts which they did not receive. Several respondents also mentioned that 30 minutes is too short for many presentations, not allowing enough time for interaction and asking questions. Several also specifically suggested having less concurrent sessions in the program. A session stream for Expert and Advanced evaluators could be introduced, to ensure this important cohort are gaining maximum value from the conference.

The AES 2016 conference program committee should review the guidelines for submission and acceptance of papers at the conference, to ensure that the papers presented are of an acceptable quality. The AES should also provide information sent out in the call for abstracts and the guidelines given to presenters and emphasising that high level presentation skills are necessary for presenting a paper at the conference. Consideration could also be given to offering training to presenters, or providing an example video of the level of presentation skills that are expected. Consideration should be given to having fewer but longer presentations within a session, to make the presentations more interactive and allow more time for discussion and questions. A higher level of review should be in place to ensure the abstract reflects the actual content of the session and ensure that student presentations are appropriately identified in the conference booklet.

### Room allocations and logistics with seating

As outlined in the sections above, the participant experience of the conference is affected negatively if attendees have to sit on the floor or can't get into a session because it is overflowing. The AES could consider a system of pre-registration for conference sessions, possibly through the Sched app, so that it can appropriately gauge the number of participants likely to attend each session. It would also be wise to utilise the Sched app to notify of room changes if sessions are likely to become too full.

Rooms also need to be allocated so they are appropriate to the style of session. Several respondents and interviewees mentioned that utilisation of the large plenary auditorium for the Indigenous stream did not work. Other participants mentioned that having a participatory workshop session in a room filled with chairs was not appropriate.

The AES needs to utilise a system to determine from presenters what kind of venue/room is best for their needs, plus gauge the number of participants likely to attend, and allocate room sizes accordingly. Flexibility is needed with room sizes and allocating sessions to rooms, so that 'last minute' participant interest, or lack of interest, in a particular session can be accommodated.

Particularly, skills-based sessions need to be allocated larger rooms than what they were at Melbourne 2015.

### Cost of registration, flights, accommodation

Cost is the key barrier to people who did not register for the conference – with over half the respondents to the non-attendee survey citing cost as the reason why they did not register. In addition to those who did not attend the conference, cost was raised by an issue by many of the interviewees on the conference floor and respondents to the online attendee survey. Participants and potential registrants want the cost of registration to be affordable, particularly for those registering from interstate who have to factor in flights and accommodation. Those from NZ particularly mentioned the exchange rate with the NZ dollar was an extra burden for them.

Several respondents and interviewees mentioned that the conference did not represent value for money.

## Networking

One of the main reasons that people register for the AES International Evaluation Conference is networking opportunities. The AES should make sure that the venue and space is conducive to networking. While the coffee station was welcomed, several participants would have liked to have had more options for networking, and some indicated that the venue for AES 2015 in Melbourne was too big and impersonal, and did not facilitate this:

*I think the venue is really big and a bit overwhelming and it actually causes the networking to be a bit difficult in terms of the immediate environment.*

Interviewee on the conference floor

*One of the biggest things, and there is - here it works, but is that whole fact that networking always comes out, is important. And that you need space, places where people can sit down and people can network.*

Interviewee on the conference floor

Another aspect of networking is the networking events that AES hosts throughout the program. The online attendee survey suggests that some of these are poorly attended (such as the first timers' breakfasts and morning walks). Consideration should be given to what kind of events people who want to network are more likely to attend. Several respondents mentioned that they would specifically like to network through the AES Special Interest Groups (SIG), but were not clear how to connect with these. Two interviewees suggested better ways to highlight when and where the SIGs are meeting, so people could link in.

In addition to those broad areas discussed above, the following are specific comments on suggestions provided on how to improve the AES conference by respondents to the online attendee survey and in the one-on-one interviews.

## Presenters/Sessions

- Incorporate the evaluator competency framework into the conference session planning
- Consider streaming sessions into experienced/intermediate/basic, as is done for the pre-conference workshops
- Have more diversity of presenters from government, public health, sustainability/environment, business intelligence, data mining
- More interactive and more practical sessions
- Consider including an evaluation in international development stream
- Have less concurrent sessions to improve the scheduling
- Consider colour coding lanyards to align with conference streams or participants' interests, to facilitate networking
- Have the presenters' powerpoints available immediately after the conference
- Allow more time for participants to move between sessions
- Discourage attendees from coming into sessions more than a few minutes after the session starts; consider having 'door people' for each room
- Improve the organisation of the poster presentations: advertise a specific time for authors to present in front of their posters
- Consider a keynote speaker panel on "When it all went wrong for me" so that participants can appreciate that even the most experienced evaluators have problems
- Consider reducing the corporate side of the conference.

## Session Chairs

- Ensure that chairs are fully briefed, and that they are selected for the interest/knowledge in the topic
- Facilitate contact between chairs and the session presenters prior to the session.

## Technology

- Expand the use of Sched, especially for determining likely numbers for sessions
- Advertise the survey button (Wufoo, for rating individual presentations within a session) widely, including at the plenary sessions, or discontinue



- Provide speakers with a Dropbox (or similar) to put their presentations in the days before the conference, to minimise viruses and bugs
- Provide 'presenter view' on presenters computer monitor during presentation.

### Logistics

- Provide a coat rack
- Provide more gluten-free options in the conference catering
- Less bread-based options in catering, more fruit and salads
- Review the amount of merchandise in the conference satchel
- Locate and use the conference manual (the 'how to run an AES conference' guide).

### Social

- Improve the AES Awards for Excellence in Evaluation presentation including scripting the event, and giving appropriate recognition to the winners
- Consider a 'pairing' or 'buddy' system, where new conference attendees/new evaluators are assigned an experienced attendees/experienced evaluator to 'show them the conference ropes'.

Overall, the AES International Evaluation Conference in Melbourne was a success from the participant experience perspective: it was well-regarded and valued. The suggestions here are for continuous improvement, particularly for the next AES International Evaluation Conference to be held in Perth in 2016.

## 8. References

- Australasian Evaluation Society. (2014). Annual Report 2013-14. Carlton, Victoria: Australasian Evaluation Society.
- Owen, J. M. (2007). *Program evaluation : forms and approaches / John M. Owen ; foreword by Marvin C. Alkin*: New York : Guilford Press, c2007. 3rd ed.

## 9. Appendices

- Appendix A Participant Information Statement, Consent Form and semi-structured interview guide for AES 2015
- Appendix B Online Attendee Survey AES 2015
- Appendix C Online Non-attendee Survey AES 2015