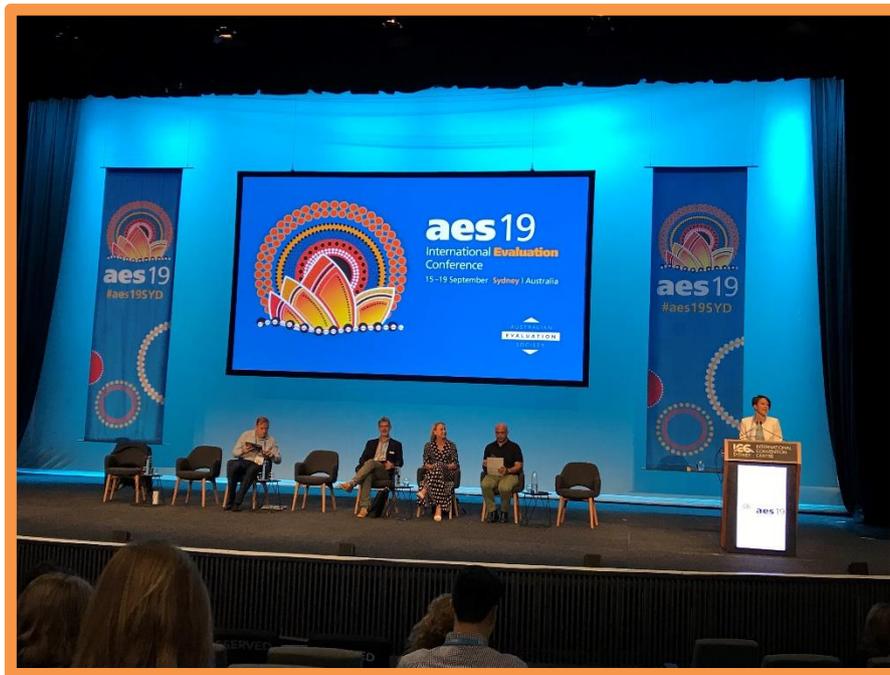# CONFERENCE REPORT:

AES 2019 International Evaluation Conference

By Amy Lawton, Social Research and Information Officer, WESTIR Limited

September 2019

AES 2019 INTERNATIONAL EVALUATION CONFERENCE

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WESTIR Limited attended the International Evaluation Conference led by the [Australian Evaluation Society](#) (AES) from Monday 16 September to Wednesday 18 September 2019. The conference was held at [ICC Sydney](#), with the theme being ['Evaluation Unboxed'](#). Being international in nature, the conference was attended by speakers and delegates from government, academia and non-government sectors from around the world.

The following report provides an overview of the conference sessions attended by WESTIR Limited. It also provides a summary of the presentation delivered by WESTIR Limited and Marrin Weejali Aboriginal Corporation on the Tuesday of the conference about the Aboriginal Family Planning Circle evaluations.

Day 1: Monday 16 September 2019

Keynote address: Without measurability there is no accountability. Why we are failing to gather evidence of what works: a focus on Indigenous suicide

The first keynote was delivered by Adjunct Professor Tracy Westerman, Managing Director of [Indigenous Psychological Services](#). Dr Westerman spoke about the core drivers of Indigenous suicide which included:

1. We need to stop thinking that Indigenous communities are "the most researched people on the planet". Data can identify suicide hotspots in the community, but it can also perpetuate racial discrimination (for example, using Aboriginality as a risk factor for crime).
2. We are yet to determine Indigenous suicide causal pathways
3. A lack of cultural competency in the workforce
4. A lack of whole of community intervention programs
5. We are yet to determine treatments of 'best practice'

Dr Westerman also spoke about the need for culturally appropriate assessment tools to treat and prevent mental ill-health in Aboriginal communities. She has developed nine unique psychometric assessment tools in this area, and over 25,000 people to date have been accredited in these assessment practices. Her final message was that there is nothing that Aboriginal communities cannot achieve and that optimism is crucial to Indigenous suicide prevention.

Panel session: Bringing the voice and knowledge of Indigenous people and communities to evidence building and evaluation in a way that empowers

This panel session brought together a number of Indigenous evaluators to discuss how evidence building and evaluation could better incorporate Indigenous voices and knowledge systems. The members of the panel included Simon Jordan (ARTD Consultants), Doyen Radcliffe (Indigenous Community Volunteers), Emma Walke (University Centre for Rural Health), Megan Williams (UTS) and Nattlie Smith (Aboriginal Housing Office).

Below is a summary of the answers to some of the questions discussed by the panel.

What has evaluation looked like for Indigenous people in the past?

Aboriginal people are wired to continually improve and use their resources in a thrifty way. Their cultural practices would not survive without it. The Western approach to evaluation is difficult to reconcile with Aboriginal cultures as it often relates to economic value and return. In the past, evaluation has framed Aboriginal people and communities from a deficit point of view and made them feel sub-human. This is slowly changing and there is a need to train the next Aboriginal generation so they do not forget where they come from.

What does culturally responsive evaluation look like and how do you engage Aboriginal people meaningfully?

Culturally responsive evaluation should be Aboriginal-led and co-designed by Aboriginal communities. This can be difficult when government funders impose parameters that are detrimental to self-determination. Government agencies need to be further educated about culturally appropriate indicators and outcomes. The best way to engage Aboriginal people meaningfully is to develop relationships with them. This can be as simple as taking time to sit down, having a yarn with the community and listening to their voices.

What does it mean to go into different communities and what protocols are needed to start meaningful relationships?

You need to be flexible in your own thinking, be respectful and don't go in with an agenda. Each community is different and you need to take the time to listen to them. Evaluators also need to start working out and negotiating what they can give back to the communities they have gone into. Giving back can be an important step in the healing process.

How can your evaluation approaches support inclusion and other strengths-based principles?

Evaluators (and those commissioning evaluations) need to learn how to build consensus. This can be difficult in the Western model where there is always a leader to follow. It is also important to remember that things don't have to be perfect before you can start working with communities. Communities will be quite generous if you uphold the strengths-based principles such as inclusion.

What are your thoughts on Indigenous data sovereignty?

Indigenous data sovereignty and cultural intellectual property is important from a human rights perspective and needs to be negotiated at the beginning of the evaluation. There is also a need to question where your funding is coming from as this may impact the community's control and access over their own data. More discussion about this topic needs to occur at a government and community level, including the need for a collective charter.

Special session: Introduction to evaluation

A special session was run by Charlie Tulloch from Policy Performance for new and emerging evaluators who needed an introductory overview of evaluation, its key concepts, definitions, approaches and resources. The presentation covered:

What is evaluation?	Systematic data collection and analysis to understand achievements (intended/unintended, positive/negative) with the aim of forming judgement about the merit, worth or success of a given intervention.
Several key definitions	• **Monitoring:** targeted, routine measurement of progress over time. • **Qualitative data collection:** measurement based on quality rather than its quantity. • **Quantitative data collection:** numerical indicator of outputs or outcomes. • **Output:** a measure of what is delivered based on available inputs. • **Outcome:** A variable or variables which measure the impact of the intervention on the target population. • **Attribution/contribution:** the extent to which the observed change in outcomes as a result of the intervention, having allowed for all other factors.
What are the common steps of evaluation?	1. Understand the intervention and how it is expected to create change (theory of change) 2. Scope and define evaluation questions (define boundaries) 3. Consider how you will judge success 4. Data collection method 5. Conduct data collection 6. Analyse evaluation findings (in response to key questions) 7. Reporting: share findings (and recommendations)
Why do we evaluate?	• Address questions about current and emerging problems • Monitor program performance and assess whether a program is still needed • Provide accountability to funders and demonstrate value for money • Provide timely feedback to decision makers and stakeholders • Reduce waste and enhance efficiency • Create an evidence base and inform broader policy
Types of evaluation approaches	• Needs analysis • Co-design • Developmental evaluation • Evaluation capacity building • Implementation evaluation

	• RCTs • Quasi-experimental designs • Theory evaluation • Realist evaluation • Goal free evaluation • Process-impact evaluation • Appreciative inquiry (or strengths-based evaluation)
Types of data collection methods	• Surveys/questionnaires • Stakeholder interviews/forums • Observational case studies/site visits • Literature review • Benchmarking/jurisdiction scans • Financial analysis/cost-benefit analysis/cost-effectiveness analysis
Resources for developing your evaluation	• An Evaluation Roadmap for A More Effective Government • Real world Evaluation: Working under budget, time, data and political constraints • AES Professional Learning Competency Framework • AIATSIS Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies • NHMRC Ethical Conduct with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities • Betterevaluation.org • Socialresearchmethods.net

Other concurrent sessions

Other concurrent sessions that were attended on the first day of the conference included:

- A trauma informed approach to capturing the voices of vulnerable children in out of home care evaluation (Department of Health and Human Services Victoria)

- The perpetrator perspective: breaking down barriers in family violence research and evaluation (Deloitte Access Economics, Social Research Centre, Department of Health and Human Services Victoria, Family Safety Victoria)

- Maximising effectiveness of evaluation to policy making process (Clear Horizon)

- Finding your voice: sharing your knowledge and elevating evaluation through social media, blogging and the Evaluation Journal of Australasia (AES)

Keynote address: Empowerment evaluation – A Powerful Stakeholder Involvement Approach Involvement Approach Fit for the Times

The second keynote was delivered by Dr David Fetterman, President and CEO of Fetterman and Associates and founder of empowerment evaluation. Empowerment evaluation is the

use of evaluation concepts, techniques and findings to foster improvement and self-determination. The key concepts and principles of empowerment evaluation include:

Empowerment Evaluation Concepts	Empowerment Evaluation Principles
1. Reflective practitioners 2. Community of learners 3. Cycles of reflection and action 4. Culture of evidence 5. Critical friend 6. Evidence	1. Improvement 2. Community ownership 3. Inclusion 4. Democratic participation 5. Social justice 6. Community knowledge 7. Evidence-based strategies 8. Capacity building 9. Organisational learning 10. Accountability

Empowerment evaluation is different from traditional evaluation where an external 'expert' comes in and undertakes the evaluation. It is an ongoing cycle which allows communities to have more control and be more engaged in the evaluation process. The evaluator is a facilitator and a 'critical' friend. The empowerment evaluation approach is considered more successful as communities who own the evaluation are more likely to find the results credible and act on recommendations.

Day 2: Tuesday 17 September 2019

Panel session: Design and systems in evaluation

The second day of the conference started with a panel discussion on the role of design and systems in evaluation. The members of the panel included Jess Dart (Clear Horizon), Kate McKegg (The Knowledge Institute), Jax Weschler (Sticky Design), Adrian Field (Dovetail Consulting Ltd) and Jen Riley (Clear Horizon).

Some of the main points that were made during the session included:

- Evaluators need to be open to working with social innovators and designers during the evaluation process.
- We need to question our identities as evaluators within white privilege paradigms.
- Evaluators need to take off the expert hat and carry around a backpack of different tools that allow us to work together.
- We need to take a systems view in order to address complex challenges.
- Social justice needs to be at the heart of all our evaluations.
- We need to understand the impacts of emerging issues such as artificial intelligence, big data, consumer data rights and data democratisation.
- Evaluators need to improve their digital literacy skills (or their relationships with the digitally literate) in order to tap into non-traditional knowledge sources.

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Aboriginal Family Planning Circle evaluation: empowering Aboriginal communities in evaluating and future-proofing Aboriginal-led community programs

Amy Lawton from WESTIR Limited co-presented with Cheryl Jackson from [Marrin Weejali Aboriginal Corporation](#) on the second day of the conference about the Aboriginal Family Planning Circle (AFPC) evaluations undertaken by WESTIR Limited in 2015 and 2017. The AFPC program is an Aboriginal-led community program which works with Aboriginal families in Western Sydney to address their complex needs and reduce the risk of having their children put into out-of-home care. The presentation was well received and outlined the history of the AFPC program, the methods, results and recommendations of the evaluations, and lessons learned by the evaluators. A copy of the presentation is available for download with this report.

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Concurrent session: Lessons learned co-designing a program and its evaluation in an emerging policy landscape

This presentation by Poppy Wise (Urbis), Malcolm Haddon (Multicultural NSW) and Zainab Kadhim (Bankstown Youth Development Services) showcased the co-design process adopted for the evaluation of the COMPACT program. The [COMPACT](#) program is a community-based resilience program funded by the NSW Government to counter violent extremism. The co-design process involved eight key steps including:

1. Presentation for all project partners to introduce Urbis and set the foundation for the co-design approach.
2. Interviews with management and frontline staff from each of the 12 funded projects to understand the design, scope and aims of the individual projects.
3. Evidence review of other community resilience building programs and approaches to measurement.
4. Draft program logic, including refining the program logic with management and frontline staff from each of the projects.
5. Draft evaluation framework with the same group of staff and management from all project partners.
6. Consultation with project partners to understand how evaluation activities would be best implemented in their project's context, leading to a tailoring of approached across several projects.
7. Intensive period of data collection, conducted by Urbis and the projects.
8. Analysis, reporting and advice.

Zainab also spoke about the benefits that Bankstown Youth Development Services received from being involved in the evaluation. This included:

1. Using the evaluation findings in internal reporting and to build on the service's foundations.
2. Helped the service understand their contribution to the COMPACT program.
3. Exposed them to new ideas on how to undertake their own evaluations.

4. Created a snapshot in time for service reflection.

Keynote address: Evaluation in the age of evidence-informed policy-making – opportunities, challenges and paths forward

The main keynote address on the second day of the conference was delivered by Dr Gary VanLandingham, Public Administration and Policy Professor from Florida State University. Dr VanLandingham spoke about how since inception, evaluation has sought to guide government policy and budgetary decisions. The rise in 'evidence-based policymaking' has occurred because policymakers across the political spectrum have a desire to improve policymaking, even if for differing reasons. Dr VanLandingham also highlighted the large amount of evaluation data now available through clearinghouses such as the [Pew Macarthur Results First Initiative](). Despite all these advances in evidence-based policymaking, there are still challenges including:

- **Increasing political polarisation:** where some political leaders seek to control information and suppress inconvenient facts.

- **Leaks in the evidence pipeline:** Many programs that work are not rigorously evaluated or their impact is not replicated in new settings.

Dr VanLandingham suggested that the way forward is to 'plug leaks in the evidence pipeline' through wider report distribution, assessing evaluation fidelity issues, supporting big data warehouses, training students with a broader analysis toolkit, and building better relationships between policymakers and evaluators.

Day 3: Wednesday 18 September 2019

Keynote: Unboxing the core like our lives depend on it – because they do

The last keynote address was delivered by Dr Jane Davidson, founder of [Real Evaluation]() and known for pioneering the [Rubrics Methodology](). Dr Davidson spoke about how the sciences had put evaluation in a box and had privileged Eurocentric methods over others. She focused on remembering the 'values' within evaluation and that these often came from outside of us through community knowledge. Dr Davidson emphasised the critical importance of 'values-based' evaluation in the post-truth era as the more our evaluations are value-neutral, the more likely they will be misinterpreted and weaponised.

Special session: Evaluation and value for money

A special session was run by Julian King from [Julian King and Associates]() on the role of value for money in evaluations. Looking at a range of definitions, Julian highlighted that value for money is about achieving the best possible outcomes relative to cost. Value for money (VFM) is essentially an evaluative question about an economic problem asking questions like:

- How well are we using resources?
- Is the resource use justified, bearing in mind outcomes and alternatives?

- How can we use our resources better?
- What next steps represent worthwhile use of remaining resources?
- What did we put in, what did we get out and was it worth it?

The problem with the value for money concept is that there is often a disciplinary divide between economics and evaluations. Economics reconciles costs and benefits but privileges certain values and assumptions, while evaluations holds wider values and assumptions but rarely costs it. This dilemma is often tackled with standard tools such as cost-benefit analysis, but it is important to remember that these tools are not the whole evaluation.

Julian went on to share his 'Value for Investment' (VFI) approach which was the basis of his PhD. It is a practical and intuitive process to communicate social value and support fairer and more sustainable resource allocation. The main steps of the VFI approach include:

1. Understand the program
2. Determine VFM criteria based on economy, efficiency, effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, equity
3. Determine VFM standards
4. Determine what evidence will be needed to address criteria and standards
5. Gather evidence
6. Descriptive analysis of evidence
7. Synthesis and judgement against the criteria and standards
8. Reporting

Julian's take home messages from the presentation were:

- Value for money is an evaluative question and should have multiple criteria
- Cost-benefit analysis is useful but not the whole evaluation
- A practical approach adopts evaluative reasoning and mixed methods

More resources about value for money is available at www.julianking.co.nz/vfi/

Concurrent session: Better Evaluation – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Evaluation Project

This session highlighted a new betterevaluation.org project which brings together evaluators, researchers and community development practitioners to share and promote evaluation methods for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The project offers a number of useful tools including:

- Examples of good practice evaluations that are community-endorsed. This provides a unique platform for the voice of both the Indigenous evaluator and the Indigenous participant in the evaluation to be heard and privileged.
- Code of conduct on how to undertake culturally safe evaluation practice with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
- Ethical protocol for evaluation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander settings.

Concluding thoughts

The closing plenary with conference convenors and speakers highlighted the main messages over the three days of the conference:

- Today's evaluators need a wider range of tools to evaluate complex systems issues. It is important to stay abreast on developments in the sector, and if there are any skills you do not have, make it a priority to collaborate with those who do.

- Evaluators should consider bringing facilitation into the process, acknowledging that "the wisdom is not going to come from me, but by bringing people together".

- Don't forget the values in evaluation, especially in a post-truth world. It is important that evaluations are grounded in social justice principles.

- Let Indigenous people lead, and own, their evaluations from the ground up.

- Evaluators need to do a better job of speaking the language of powerful decision makers (particularly economic impact) and communicating their findings to the masses.

- Evaluators need to develop better relationships with policymakers, and policymakers need to embrace a variety of evaluation approaches. Some gold standard evaluation methods (for example, randomised control trials) measure internal validity but are quite weak in measuring the impact of external factors.

- Be yourself. Be brave, ask questions, speak up, be an advocate and aim to be a critical and creative thinker.