Author's response to reviews

Title: A scoping review about conference objectives and evaluative practices: How do we get more out of them?

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Reviewer 1:

1. I am concerned about the methodology: nature of papers reviewed & very small/unbalanced sample of interviewed people. Concerning the nature of papers, my impression is that only “articles” were reviewed and that the team did not look at all at conference websites (which usually describe well the objectives of the conference and may also contain an evaluation report) or at conference evaluation reports (e.g., those published on the LIFT conference and the International AIDS Conference: http://www.iasociety.org/Default.aspx?pageId=562). Also, I am not sure if the team considered journals focusing on Evaluation such as the American Journal of Evaluation and The International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice.

   - Google/website searches were conducted in an early phase of the research but they yielded very little substance and no evaluation reports, which is why we chose not to report this method and the meagre results. Given the number of conferences convened annually, it did not seem feasible to search every conference website and we could not identify defensible criteria to purposively sample select conference websites. Hence we did rely on “articles,” however, we included both published articles and unpublished (grey literature) reports.
   - Evaluation journals were considered and citations from such journals were captured in the search strategy but those we found did not meet our inclusion criteria, usually because the evaluations were not specific to a conference that lasted more than one day with more than 100 attendees (i.e., they tended to be either theoretical papers or small workshop-type evaluations).
   - We agree that a limitation of the study is the small sample of (predominantly organizer-based) key informant interviews and we noted this in the discussion of the manuscript. The findings from the key informant interviews are presented as preliminary findings from key stakeholders to supplement what was found through the scoping review.

2. In the section “evaluation methods”, it is surprising that action plans and follow-up surveys are not mentioned (this is something I have practiced as conference evaluator and that allowed me to collect a substantial amount of qualitative feedback from participants about the long-term influences/impacts of the conference on their work, their organization’s work and impact on policy at national and international level).

   - In the first draft of the manuscript, the evaluation methods component of Figure 2 included a category for follow-up methods but it was eliminated because we felt it was confusing to have one category based on time of evaluation, another based on type of evaluation (i.e. quantitative vs. qualitative) as well as a third category that combined time and type. Follow-up surveys are still mentioned in the key informant subsection of the results section, and alluded to in Figure 3, which categorizes some indicators as “Follow-up indicators (measured after a certain period of time has passed post-conference)”. To ensure that the importance of follow-up surveys and related evaluations is clear, a paragraph in the section “evaluation methods” has been added and this approach is highlighted again in the ALL WELL conference example.

3. The section on theories/models is very technical and it’s really hard to understand how this could be applied. I would simplify it and add a short description for the other ones (right now, the text only describes 2 of them).
The theory section has been edited to remove some of the overly technical statements and focused on explaining how these theories were utilized in the examples. For example, the last part in the second paragraph provides a specific example question that could be developed using the theory of planned behaviour. Only two examples were included in this section because the authors explained at least partially how the theory influenced their study, whereas many other articles just stated which theories they drew upon in their evaluation. With this in mind, we feel it makes the most sense to highlight these two examples and outline the rest of the theories in a table (Table 1).

4. Page 12 (2nd paragraph): it is said that a response rate of 30% to 40% is mediocre. This really depends on the sample size: a sample of 3,000 respondents out of 9,000 delegates is likely to be representative of the total delegate population while a sample of 60 respondents out of 100 participants might not be representative. So, the response rate is not always a valid indicator of the evaluation quality and usefulness.

- While we disagree with this assertion, the manuscript has been changed so that the average response rate of 30 to 40% is reported but it is left up to the reader to judge the acceptability of this number. We believe that most readers will take this to be a mediocre response rate.

Minor essential revisions

5. In the introduction, I would further highlight the fact that very few conference organizers do evaluate their conference in a systematic way and only a minority publishes evaluation reports.

- Added in last sentence of 3rd paragraph in the introduction

6. In the introduction, one gets the impression the team focuses on conference impact evaluation rather than on evaluation as a whole. This should be corrected.

- Corrected. The term impact was removed and replaced by more general terms of “success based on pre-determined objectives”, which helps reiterate the relationship between objectives and evaluative practices.

7. Tables and figures should be part of the core text, have an accurate title and contain a clear legend.

- I believe according to manuscript submission guidelines on the HARPS website, figures should be attached in separate documents with titles and legends in the main text. This is the procedure that has been followed for this submission.

8. Figure 2 is really hard to understand. I would split it in several parts and replace the tables with horizontal bar charts. In addition, the abbreviation NR should be spelled out at least once.

- We have shown the figure to a large number of individuals who find it very helpful to have all of the contents of figure 2 in one place, including a “map” of relevant citations. The value added from having these corresponding citations readily available is lost if replaced with bar charts. We agree that the figure is not as nice looking as it could be and we would be happy to have a graphic designer improve the figure if the manuscript is accepted for publication.
9. Headers in italics are not visible at all (remove italics and bold or underline them instead).

- Corrected

10. Page 4 (2nd Paragraph, 1st sentence): the term “participating” is not accurate because the definition of stakeholders adopted in the review included organizers.

- Corrected

11. Page 7 (2nd Paragraph): it is said that 45 publications were included while the rest of the document says 44.

- Corrected (1 paper was removed after initial screening when it was determined to be solely theoretical, as shown in Figure 1)

12. The term “conference evaluation framework” does not reflect very well the content of the framework which is also capturing the conference objectives. I would reformulate it as: conference objectives & evaluation framework.

- Our framework connects five key elements of conference evaluations (as stated in the abstract and represented in Figure 2), one of which is conference objectives. Therefore, we feel that objectives should not be included in the title of the framework, any more than “methods” or “indicators”, for example.

13. Harmonize language/check consistency throughout the manuscript for the terms: conferences vs. meetings; evaluation vs. impact evaluation.

- Corrected. Meeting was changed to conferences throughout aside from a few instances when a different definition was warranted (e.g., when referring to the Cochrane review on meetings).

14. Although the language is correct, the document should be reviewed by an editor. Some sentences are a bit too long and technical.

- We have reviewed the manuscript to simplify the few sentences that were a bit too long and technical.

Discretionary revisions

15. I would add in Appendix the list of the 44 papers that were reviewed.

- Given that all the included references can be found in one location (Figure 2), having a list of the included studies does not seem to add value to this review. However, if the editors prefer us to include this list as an additional file, we can certainly do this.

Reviewer 2:
It is notable (but not noted by the authors) that the one paper identified that offers a theory specific to conference settings (new learning) is not aligned with any particular profession or sector, and therefore arguably applicable to any.

- It was stated generally in the discussion that incorporating evaluations from a variety of social sectors strengthened the review but we have incorporated “New Learning” as a specific example in that section.

I did not understand the phrase ‘conference equity’ (middle page 10)

- Conference equity is simply an objective of one of the conferences that was included in our review and displayed in Figure 2. It was not used in Figure 3 because there was only the single paper that reported on equity and therefore would not provide meaningful linkages between purpose and indicators in general. Given that the sentence brings up the term conference equity, without explanation and in a way that takes away from the focus of the paragraph, we have removed the sentence.

Minor Essential Revisions

The evaluation framework illustrated in figure 2 is difficult to assimilate given the number of criss-crossing lines. It would be easier to see the relationships if some of the lines were coded visually, such as (- - - - - - ) or (-- --- -- -- -- ) or (======).

- We have coded the lines according to number of papers corresponding to the link made, using different thicknesses and dashes, to make the lines stand out from each other. This also allows the removal of the numbers along the lines, as they were slightly untidy in some places. However, as indicated above, we can work with a graphic designer to further improve the figures if the manuscript is accepted for publication.