

Results from the NZAE 2008 Web Survey

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Abstract

The New Zealand Association of Economists conducted a Web-based survey in 2008. Respondents were recruited via email, using the NZAE database of members, past members, and other economists. The responses (N = 180) provided information about economists in New Zealand and their preferences regarding current and potential activities of the Association. Respondents were drawn fairly evenly from the government, university, and private sectors, and 31 per cent were not members of the NZAE. They expressed a diversity of opinions regarding actual and potential Association activities, with some significant differences of opinions across subsamples. In particular, non-members were less supportive of current Association activities. The annual conference received high marks, as did the journal. Respondents were also interested in Web access to a calendar of events and academic publications.

Introduction

The New Zealand Association of Economists (NZAE) is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2009. In order to continue to be valuable to the members, the Association should understand the needs of New Zealand economists and ensure that it is providing the appropriate services. The Membership Committee of the NZAE thus decided to conduct two surveys, one of the attendees at the 2008 Phillips Symposium, and the other a Web-based survey. This paper presents the results of the latter.

Other economics associations have also conducted surveys of their members. For example, the Agricultural Economics Society (AES) in the UK surveyed members and non-members in 2007 'to get views on the Society, the Journal, EuroChoices and the Annual Conference' (Anon., 2008). The New Zealand Agricultural and Resource Economics Society also a survey a few years ago to determine how the society could best serve its members (Scrimgeour, 2005). Results from these surveys did not appear to be available.

The Australian Agricultural and Resource Economics Society (AARES) published results from its recent survey. The society surveyed all individuals who were members from 2006 to 2008, and had responses from 132 people. They assessed demographic characteristics and involvement with the society. Key findings were that the journal and the conference were valuable or extremely valuable to most members, and nearly three-quarters of respondents were satisfied or highly satisfied with their membership.

The rest of this paper discusses the method used for the NZAE survey, the specific findings, and some implications for the association.

Method

The method for obtaining the opinions of New Zealand economists was a survey of known economists, whether members or non-members.

The survey instrument was a Web-based questionnaire. The questionnaire had six screens or pages that could be navigated with numbered tabs. The first page contained four questions regarding the respondent: about membership in the NZAE, about the type and sector of employment, and about location. The next three pages (pages 2 through 4) solicited opinions regarding the usefulness of current and potential products, services, and activities of the Association. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale from 'Very useful' to 'Not useful'. An additional 'Don't know' response was also available. Page 2 contained questions about current services or activities, including the newsletter (Asymmetric Information), the journal (NZ Economic Papers), the annual conference, and the Website. Page 3 asked respondents to consider the usefulness of lunchtime networking events, evening networking events, and half-day training seminars. Page 4 presented different potential Web-based services and asked respondents to indicate their usefulness. The fifth page in the survey presented two statements regarding the level of professionalisation and asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement on a five-point scale (strongly agree – strongly disagree). This page also asked respondents to indicate whether they were members of other economics organisations or any other professional organisations, and provided text boxes for them to write the names of the organisations. The final page of the questionnaire simply provided a text box and asked for any feedback.

Respondents were recruited from the NZAE database. The database contains the names of people who are members or have been members in the last few years, as well as those people who have attended NZAE conferences in the last few years (both members and non-members). In addition, an effort had been made in 2007 and 2008 to identify as many economists as possible in the lead-up to the 2008 Phillips Conference. Economists in the government and universities had thus also been added to the database. The database was reviewed for redundant entries, which resulted in a list of 849 people. Emails inviting them to participate in the survey and directing them to the survey Website were sent to their most recent email addresses.

The survey instrument was developed using Apollo software and hosted on the Lincoln University servers. Responses to the survey were downloaded into Excel format from the survey Website. They were then analysed using SPSS 15.

Results

A total of 180 people responded to the survey, or 21.2 per cent of the 849 email addresses in the list. Emails that were not delivered were not tracked, so the response rate for deliver email could not be calculated.

The characteristics of the respondents are presented in table 1. Over four-fifths of respondents indicated that they worked as economists, and 94 per cent of the sample worked in New Zealand. The sample was roughly evenly divided across the government, private, and university sectors. For the government workers, nearly all of them were in central

government. The largest group of private sector individuals was from the consulting sector, with 'other' a close second. Over half the respondents were from Wellington, with 15 per cent from Auckland and ten per cent from Christchurch/Lincoln.

[Table 1]

A more detailed look at the respondents is given in table 2. The membership was crosstabulated with the sector of employment and location of respondents. The largest group of non-members, nearly one-half, is from the university sector. This may reflect the method used to construct the database: all university staff in economics, both members and non-members, could be identified from staff lists, but similar lists were not available for the private sector. By count, the central government provided the next largest group of non-members, while 'private sector – other' provided the second largest group of non-members by percentage. Auckland and Wellington had the same number of non-members, but Wellington had a much larger number of members. Auckland, along with Hamilton and Dunedin, had more non-members than members reply to the survey. These detailed results are statistically significant, as calculated with a chi-square statistic, although the results are weakened by the low number of responses in several categories.

[Table 2]

The first set of opinion questions concerned the services or activities currently provided by the NZAE. The item with the highest mean response and the highest number of responses in the two highest usefulness categories was the annual conference. The second most useful item was the *New Zealand Economic Papers*, the academic journal of the Association. The newsletter, *Asymmetric Information*, was third on the list, and also attracted a high number of 'don't know' responses. The least useful item and the one with the highest 'don't know' responses was the Website; less than half of respondents gave it a rating higher than 'neutral'. A chi-square statistic found that these differences in responses could be considered significantly different.

[Table 3]

The next set of questions concerned potential activities that the Association could organise. The most useful of these activities was felt to be half-day training seminars or workshops. Forty-four respondents used the textbox to indicate possible topics for these workshops, and suggestions covered a wide range of economics topics. Many suggestions indicated that respondents wanted to know about advances in economics, new areas of research, or developments that had occurred since they had completed their university studies. Another common suggestion was for workshops in applied econometrics. The survey also asked respondents about the usefulness of lunchtime and evening networking meetings. Although the responses to these two questions were somewhat different, the difference was not statistically significant. These activities had lower mean scores than the half-day workshops and lower mean scores than any of the current activities.

[Table 4]

Respondents were next asked about the usefulness of several Internet activities or functions. The most useful item was felt to be a calendar of events. The next two most useful items were access to publications, with access to academic publications rated higher than access to

popular publications. Discussion forums and news feeds were not considered as useful, and were rated lower than the existing Association activities. The lowest-rated items, both with mean results over 3.00, were hosting of blogs and email addresses through the NZAE. The responses to the different suggested items were all statistically distinct, with one exception: the difference between access to popular publications and the economic and financial news feed was not statistically significant.

[Table 5]

The next two questions asked respondents to assess the state of the economics profession in New Zealand. The first asked if respondents felt that there had been too much professionalisation in New Zealand, with no definition offered of 'professionalisation'. The modal response was 'neutral', and the second most frequent response was 'disagree'. The combined agreement score ('strongly agree' plus 'agree') was nine per cent of the sample. The second question in this vein was whether certification of economists in New Zealand would be good for the profession. Again, the modal response was 'neutral', with 28 per cent agreeing and 36 per cent disagreeing.

[Table 6]

The final two closed-end questions asked respondents whether they were members of other economics organisations and other professional organisations. Text boxes were also included so that respondents could indicate the names of the organisations. Forty per cent of respondents were members of other economics organisations, while 60 per cent were not. The main other economics organisation was the American Economics Association, with 22 respondents. The New Zealand and/or Australian Agricultural and Resource Economics Society was the second most frequent 'other' economics organisation, with 10 respondents. Several other organisation appeared multiple times. Membership in other professional organisations was lower, with 21 per cent of respondents indicating that they held other memberships. Three organisations gained three or more responses: Institute of Directors, Institute of Public Administration of New Zealand, and New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants.

[Table 7]

The next step in the analysis was to determine whether identifiable subsamples were different in their responses. Respondents were grouped into those employed in the university, government, and other (private) sectors, and their indications about the usefulness of current and potential activities were compared. These subsamples were significantly different in their evaluations of three activities. Those in the university sector was less interested in lunchtime and evening networking events. Respondents from the government sector were more likely to indicate that lunchtime events would be useful, while those in other sectors were more interested in evening events. The sectors also differed in the value they place on access to academic publications through the NZAE website. The other (private) sector was most interested, while the university sector was least interested in this service. It should be noted that the sectors did not differ in their opinions on the useful of access to popular press publications. On all other current and potential activities, the sectors were similar in their judgements.

[Table 8]

The other subsamples compared were those who were members versus those who were not. These two groups differed significantly on the usefulness of all four current offerings of the Association. A large part of the difference was the much greater number of non-members who responded 'don't know' when asked to judge current activities, and the non-members also tended towards neutral responses. When the survey turned to prospective activities or services, the members and non-members judged them similarly.

[Table 9]

In addition to the results presented above, factor and cluster analyses were conducted on the data. The results largely pointed to a one-cluster solution, and also suggested that response patterns could not be reduced to a few underlying factors. Because these were essentially nil findings, they are not reported.

Discussion

The survey results indicate that economists in New Zealand are a diverse group. They work in many different parts of the economy and are spread throughout the country. The NZAE membership may not fully represent these economists: the members amongst the respondents were more likely to be in government and more likely to be in Wellington. This result may be an artefact of having held the 2008 Annual Conference in Wellington. However, the spread across sectors, in particular, suggests that the Association should be careful in balancing the needs of the different groups.

The questions about the usefulness of activities all had the same response scale, although one question concerned actual activities and two questions concerned potential activities. Table 10 ranks all the activities in the survey as if the response scale were consistent across all three questions. Given that assumption, three of the four current activities ranked in the top half of the list. The Website was the least useful of current services, but the survey results also suggest ways to improve it. The two potential activities that received the most support were a calendar of events and access to academic publications, and these would make the Website more useful. Access to academic publications was also more highly rated by non-university respondents, suggesting that this service could prove quite valuable to two-thirds of the membership. Overall, the results suggest that the things the Association is doing are valuable to economists in New Zealand, and also suggest some things the Association could do to improve its offerings.

The respondents did not appear to have identifiable segments. Current members are happier about current services, which suggests that what the Association does may contribute to membership. However, members and non-members rated all the potential services similarly. Respondents were split along sector lines on the usefulness of access to academic publications and networking events, but were in agreement on all other activities. Factor and cluster analysis, the results of which were not presented, found very little in the way of underlying factors and no latent clusters.¹ As a result, it is probably fair to treat economists in New Zealand as a largely homogenous group.

¹ There was some indication in the results of the factor analysis of a positivity factor, which simply raised all the responses a fraction.

The survey presented several different types of events, in addition to the annual conference, that respondents might find useful. All three were in the bottom half of the ratings. The most useful was felt to be the half-day seminars or workshop. The suggestions for workshop comments reflected the broad range of interests. Many respondents felt they were not up to date with developments in the discipline, particularly with regard to econometric techniques. The format of the annual conference may not address this concern. If the Association were to take on organising workshops, the challenge would be to make them sufficiently general to attract enough participants and sufficiently technical to be useful.

The results indicate that the professionalisation of economics and certification of economists do not concern respondents. Many respondents were neutral on these issues, and the rest were divided on whether more should be done or not.

For the majority of respondents, the NZAE is their only economics or professional organisation. It is therefore important that it meets their needs as much as possible. These results suggest that the Association has been doing a good job at this, and also suggest some activities it can undertake to better serve its members.

References

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Anon. (2009). E-survey results are now available! Newsletter of the Australian Agricultural and Resource Economics Society Inc. Volume 21, Number 1, April.

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Table 1. Characteristics of respondents

	Response Category	Count	Percentage ^a
Work as an economist	Yes	146	81%
	No	34	19%
	Total	180	100%
Work in New Zealand	Yes	169	94%
	No	11	6%
	Total	180	100%
NZAE member	Yes	123	69%
	No	56	31%
	Total	179	100%
Primary sector of employment	Government - Central	56	31%
	Government - Local	4	2%
	Private sector - Consulting	26	15%
	Private sector - Research group	12	7%
	Private sector - Other	23	13%
	University	57	32%
	Total	178	100%
Location	Auckland	27	15%
	Hamilton	6	3%
	Palmerston North	8	4%
	Wellington	96	54%
	Christchurch/Lincoln	18	10%
	Dunedin	8	4%
	Other urban/town	13	7%
	Rural area	3	2%
	Total	179	100%

^a Calculated as a percentage of valid responses (excluding missing responses).

Table 2. Crosstabulation – sector and location by membership

		Non-member	Member	Total
Sector	Government - Central	13	43	56
	Government - Local	2	2	4
	Private sector - Consulting	2	24	26
	Private sector - Research group	1	11	12
	Private sector - Other	10	12	22
	University	27	30	57
	Total	55	122	177
	Chi-square statistic	21.0		
	Degrees of freedom	5		
	Significance	0.001		
Location	Auckland	17	10	27
	Hamilton	4	2	6
	Palmerston North	3	5	8
	Wellington	17	78	95
	Christchurch/Lincoln	5	13	18
	Dunedin	6	2	8
	Other urban/town	2	11	13
	Rural area	1	2	3
	Total	55	123	178
		Chi-square statistic	33.1	
	Degrees of freedom	7		
	Significance	0.000		

Table 3. Usefulness of current activities

	Very useful 1	2	Neutral 3	4	Not useful 5	Don't know	Total	Mean ^a
Asymmetric Information	23 13%	49 28%	46 26%	12 7%	6 3%	42 24%	178 100%	2.48
New Zealand Economic Papers	27 15%	65 37%	42 24%	14 8%	6 3%	23 13%	177 100%	2.40
NZAE annual conference	42 24%	59 33%	37 21%	9 5%	2 1%	29 16%	178 100%	2.13
NZAE Website	11 6%	40 23%	59 33%	17 10%	6 3%	44 25%	177 100%	2.75

^a The mean is calculated over the number of responses that indicated usefulness on the scale of 1 to 5, using the weights given (i.e., very useful = 1, etc.). Missing and 'don't know' responses are not included in the mean.

Table 4. Usefulness of potential activities

	Very useful		Neutral		Not useful			
	1	2	3	4	5	Don't know	Total	Mean ^a
Lunchtime networking events	17 10%	49 28%	47 27%	17 10%	28 16%	15 9%	173 100%	2.94
Evening networking events	10 6%	50 28%	54 31%	20 11%	27 15%	15 9%	176 100%	3.02
Half-day training seminars or workshops	24 14%	45 26%	46 27%	15 9%	16 9%	24 14%	170 100%	2.68

^a The mean is calculated over the number of responses that indicated usefulness on the scale of 1 to 5, using the weights given (i.e., very useful = 1, etc.). Missing and 'don't know' responses are not included in the mean.

Table 5. Usefulness of potential Internet services or activities

	Very useful 1	2	Neutral 3	4	Not useful 5	Don't know	Total	Mean ^a
An email address hosted by NZAE	9 5%	18 10%	35 20%	23 13%	84 49%	4 2%	173 100%	3.92
Access to academic publications	58 33%	67 38%	26 15%	8 5%	16 9%	0 0%	175 100%	2.18
Access to popular press publications	44 25%	62 35%	36 21%	11 6%	21 12%	1 1%	175 100%	2.44
Calendar of events	54 31%	81 47%	26 15%	6 3%	6 3%	0 0%	173 100%	2.01
Discussion forums	21 12%	80 46%	43 25%	11 6%	15 9%	4 2%	174 100%	2.52
Economic and financial news feed	34 20%	62 36%	42 24%	15 9%	18 10%	1 1%	172 100%	2.54
Hosting of blogs	12 7%	41 24%	66 38%	22 13%	25 14%	8 5%	174 100%	3.04

^a The mean is calculated over the number of responses that indicated usefulness on the scale of 1 to 5, using the weights given (i.e., very useful = 1, etc.). Missing and 'don't know' responses are not included in the mean.

Table 6. Professionalisation of NZ economics

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know	Total	Mean ^a
Economics in New Zealand has been pushed towards too much professionalisation.	2 1%	14 8%	61 35%	55 32%	15 9%	27 16%	174 100%	3.46
Certification of economists working in NZ would be good for the profession.	9 5%	40 23%	47 27%	37 21%	26 15%	16 9%	175 100%	3.19

^a The mean is calculated over the number of responses on the Likert scale, with 'strongly agree' = 1, 'agree' = 2, etc. Missing and 'don't know' responses are not included in the mean.

Table 7. Other memberships

	Response	Count	Percentage ^a
Membership of other economics organisations	Yes	69	40%
	No	105	60%
	Total	174	100%
Organisations indicated: ^b	Am Econ Assoc	22	
	NZARES/AARES	10	
	Econometrics Soc	8	
	Royal Econ Soc	6	
	LEANZ	4	
	Ag Econ Soc	3	
	Canadian Econ Assoc	3	
	Econ Design Network	3	
	West Econ Assoc	3	
Other professional organisational memberships	Yes	37	21%
	No	137	79%
	Total	174	100%
Organisations indicated: ^b	Inst of Directors	5	
	Inst of Pub Admin of NZ	4	
	NZ Inst of Chart Accountants	3	

^a Calculated over the number of valid responses (missing responses not included).

^b For organisations with three or more responses.

Table 8. Significant crosstabulation results by sector

		University	Government	Other	Total
Lunchtime networking events	1- Very useful	6	4	6	16
	2	8	25	16	49
	3 - Neutral	13	14	19	46
	4	9	6	2	17
	5 - Not useful	16	4	8	28
	Don't know	4	6	5	15
	Total	56	59	56	171
Chi-square statistic	23.3				
Degrees of freedom	10				
Significance	0.010				
Evening networking events	1- Very useful	5	2	3	10
	2	11	14	25	50
	3 - Neutral	12	22	18	52
	4	8	11	1	20
	5 - Not useful	16	4	7	27
	Don't know	4	7	4	15
	Total	56	60	58	174
Chi-square statistic	28.6				
Degrees of freedom	10				
Significance	0.001				
Access to academic publications	1- Very useful	15	17	25	57
	2	17	26	24	67
	3 - Neutral	9	10	7	26
	4	3	4	1	8
	5 - Not useful	13	2	1	16
	Don't know	0	0	0	0
	Total	57	59	58	174
Chi-square statistic	24.0				
Degrees of freedom	8				
Significance	0.002				

Table 9. Significant crosstabulation results by membership

		Non-member	Member	Total
Asymmetric Information	1- Very useful	2	21	23
	2	7	42	49
	3 - Neutral	8	37	45
	4	3	9	12
	5 - Not useful	1	5	6
	Don't know	34	8	42
	Total	55	122	177
Chi-square statistic	65.1			
Degrees of freedom	5			
Significance	0.000			
NZEP	1- Very useful	7	20	27
	2	11	53	64
	3 - Neutral	14	28	42
	4	2	12	14
	5 - Not useful	2	4	6
	Don't know	18	5	23
	Total	54	122	176
Chi-square statistic	32.2			
Degrees of freedom	5			
Significance	0.000			
NZAE annual conference	1- Very useful	7	35	42
	2	13	46	59
	3 - Neutral	11	25	36
	4	4	5	9
	5 - Not useful	2	0	2
	Don't know	18	11	29
	Total	55	122	177
Chi-square statistic	24.5			
Degrees of freedom	5			
Significance	0.000			
NZAE Website	1- Very useful	3	8	11
	3	10	30	40
	4 - Neutral	13	45	58
	5	4	13	17
	6 - Not useful	1	5	6
	Don't know	24	20	44
	Total	55	121	176
Chi-square statistic	15.1			
Degrees of freedom	5			
Significance	0.010			

Table 10. Activities ordered by mean score

	Mean ^a	Order
Calendar of events	2.01	1
NZAE annual conference	2.13	2
Access to academic publications	2.18	3
New Zealand Economic Papers	2.40	4
Access to popular press publications	2.44	5
Asymmetric Information	2.48	6
Discussion forums	2.52	7
Economic and financial news feed	2.54	8
Half-day training seminars or workshops	2.68	9
NZAE Website	2.75	10
Lunchtime networking events	2.94	11
Evening networking events	3.02	12
Hosting of blogs	3.04	13
An email address hosted by NZAE	3.92	14

Bold represents current activities of the NZAE.