

ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

Phase 1 Report:  
Evaluating the impact of NCRM Training and  
Capacity Building Activities

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## Evaluating the impact of NCRM Training and Capacity Building Activities

### **Introduction**

The core aim of the NCRM is to improve the range and quality of research methods used by the social science community. One of the key means of achieving this is through the Centre's training and capacity building programme. The Centre (comprising Hub and Nodes) runs an annual programme of training, development and awareness raising events. Each year the Hub and Nodes propose a programme of events drawing on the needs identified within their communities and via training needs assessments. The final programme is then agreed at an annual meeting in May each year. The programme is publicised via the NCRM website and training database as well as through other Centre networks.

There are a range of events that have taken place as part of the Centre's training and capacity building (TCB) activities. These comprise:

- One or two day traditional tutor-led training events, such as workshops
- traditional training events with follow-on e-learning activities
- seminars and presentations
- discussion and consultation fora
- placements with Nodes

A minimum of 24 NCRM events take place each year; each Node runs a minimum of 3 events and the Hub runs a minimum of 6 events.

This qualitative evaluation set out to begin to explore the impact of NCRM TCB activities. Assessing the impact of the Centre's TCB activities on the social science community as a whole is problematic for a number of methodological reasons; even if it were possible to take a 'before NCRM' and 'after NCRM' assessment of research methods knowledge, it is not possible to separate out the impact of NCRM in an environment where there are numerous other initiatives and providers of research methods training. This evaluation focuses on the impact that the training or development undertaken has had on the individuals who have undertaken it. More specifically, it aims to explore why participants have opted to undertake courses/attend events, what the outcomes of participation have been and what uses they have made of the training/development they have undertaken.

This evaluation is to be conducted in two phases; phase one comprises a qualitative evaluation of a sample of people who have attended a range of NCRM events. This phase is conducted in order to obtain some in-depth data on views of NCRM training/development events and the different outcomes achieved and uses to which they are put. As such we view this phase as an important study in its own right. However, in addition, this phase has also been conducted in order to assist in the development of meaningful and appropriate questions for a subsequent questionnaire. Phase 2 builds on

phase 1 and comprises a survey of course attendees to explore the range of outcomes across all NCRM course/event attendees over a one year period.

It is not the intention of this evaluation to identify participants' views about the success or otherwise of specific NCRM courses/events; evaluation of specific courses is undertaken via a questionnaire distributed to participants at the end of each event. Our primary interest here (as noted above) is to evaluate the impact of attending courses. Nevertheless, as part of assessing this, participants reflected on their views about the courses they attended. Where relevant to the aim of this evaluation, we have included data relating to this.

This report focuses on phase 1 of this evaluation.

## Method

Lists of all attendees at NCRM courses over the 12 month period from October 2005-September 2006 were obtained from the Hub and Nodes. During this period a range of events were run, these comprised: 'traditional' face-to-face training events/workshops of 1 or 2 days duration; 'blended learning' events comprising face to face training and follow up e learning; seminars; group-specific events (i.e. aimed at a particular group of participants); and, placements. The majority of events organised during this period were traditional training events (n=20). There were 4 seminars (the QUALITI node also ran 7 roadshows), two blended learning events, one group specific event (aimed at education policy makers) and 3 people attended placements at one Node. The decision was made not to include seminars (and roadshows) in this evaluation because we surmised that the *impact* of attending such events is less clear than with events with a specific focus on training.

The intention was that the sample would comprise 20 people drawn from a range of courses/events as follows:

**Table 1: Proposed Sample**

Type of Course	Number of interviewees
Traditional events	12
Blended learning events	4
Placements	2
Group specific event	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>

Within this sampling frame it was intended that the aim would be to recruit people across the career trajectory and that, where possible we would include people from non-academic settings.

E-mails were sent to participants in groups of six over a period of ten weeks. A total of 53 people were approached and 19 of these consented to an interview. The numbers recruited were as set out in table 1 with the exception that only one participant was recruited from the 'group specific event'

category. The characteristics of interviewees and the courses they attended are as follows:

**Table 2: Interviewees: Sector of Employment**

Type of course	HEI	Government/voluntary sector
Qualitative courses <sup>1</sup>	6	0
Quantitative courses <sup>2</sup>	3	2
Mixed methods <sup>3</sup> and Research synthesis	5	1
Placements	2	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>3</b>

**Table 3: interviewees: Current Posts**

Type of Course	PhD	Junior Researcher	Senior Researcher
Qualitative courses <sup>1</sup>	3	2	1
Quantitative courses <sup>2</sup>	0	2	3
Mixed methods <sup>3</sup> and Research synthesis	1	2	3
Placements	2	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>

<sup>1</sup> Courses comprised: creative interviewing, visual methods and discourse analysis

<sup>2</sup> Courses comprised: STATA, Bayesian analysis, event history analysis, multi level modelling

<sup>3</sup> Online research methods course

An interview guide was constructed (see appendix 1). The interview guide covered the following issues: reasons for attending the event and expectations; views about the event; the ways in which the participant has been able to make use of the content of the event; plans to make use of the content of the event; barriers and opportunities for building on the content of the event. Interviews were conducted over the telephone. These interviews were audio recorded and lasted for around 30 minutes (range 15-50 minutes). The audio tapes were transcribed and analysed thematically.

## Findings

### Reasons for/Aims of attending

Participants identified a range of reasons for deciding to attend these events. The most common reason was to learn about a methodological approach or skill to enable them to undertake a specific research activity. In some cases, researchers had planned to undertake a study using a particular approach or technique that they felt they did not know enough about and wanted to gain the skills in order to enable them to do so. Some researchers (especially PhD students) wanted to incorporate an approach into their current work and attended the event with the aim of exploring the feasibility of doing so; these researchers wanted to find out what using the approach would entail and whether it was realistic within the time frame in which they were working. Others wanted to find out more about approaches to enable them to legitimate their planned use or to gain resources, such as reading lists, to help them in writing up the methodological background to the work they proposed undertaking. The following quotes illustrate these rationales for attending the events:

“I had very specific objectives. I’m in the process of trying to write a small grant proposal for the ESRC and the course was exploring some of the techniques I’m interested in using”  
(interviewee 16, senior academic researcher, blended event)

“I wanted to be reassured that that method is effectively a recognised method and to be clear that what I was planning was not going to be completely different from what is the legitimate or recognised brand of on-line interviewing ... and I probably also thought I would be provided with some references that I could go away and look at as well, some sources. Because I had in my head that at some point I would be writing a methods section for a paper and it would be helpful to have access to some references”  
(interviewee 11, junior academic researcher, traditional 1 day event)

“Yes I was really clear what I wanted to get out of it ...I wanted to know about the techniques, how they actually did it, what problems they had. I wanted to know the timescale that was involved, obviously I’ve only got a year [left for my PhD]. So I wanted to know if there was potential for me to develop the expertise necessary to do it properly”  
(interviewee 12, PhD student, placement)

However, for some researchers, the rationale for attending was not to gain the skills to undertake specific research but to expand their general methodological knowledge or understanding. Some researchers, particularly those working at senior levels or in policy settings, noted that they wanted a ‘flavour’ of the method so that they could understand techniques to help them when working with statisticians, when reading papers or when commissioning

research. This was noted specifically in relation to statistical methods courses. One senior policy researcher noted:

“the emphasis that I wanted was an overview of what the technique is to help us to interpret what we get back from the research [we commission]”  
(interviewee 17, Senior Government Researcher, group specific event)

An interesting rationale for attending events identified by some participants was to meet the person running the course and to hear them talk about the specific approach or method:

“When the email came round about it and I saw that he was doing it I thought, you know, because I’ve heard good things about him before from colleagues and they said that he was a very good speaker and that he’s very good at what he does and so I was keen to go and listen to what he had to say about it really. I think it was a big pull that it was him ... had it been some slightly less well known person I probably wouldn’t [have gone]”.  
(interviewee 2, PhD student, traditional 2 day event)

“Her name on the course was a huge selling point, absolutely huge. In fact if it had not been her name would I have taken it? Possibly, but maybe not. It was very largely for her name”  
(interviewee 16, senior researcher, blended event)

### **Views of events attended**

Most participants were very enthusiastic about the courses/events they had attended. Thirteen of the 19 people interviewed viewed the events very positively. A factor that appeared important in these positive evaluations was the identification of the people running the events as ‘experts’ who were held in high esteem by participants because of their reputations for high quality work as well as the enthusiasm and commitment to training and supporting the development of methodological expertise among social scientists.

Only one interviewee viewed the event they attended as poor in that it didn’t meet with her expectations. Criticisms made by other interviewees related to the level or pace of events, their timing or the mix of participants. One participant felt the 2 day course attended was too rushed for him. Another noted that the timing was not right for her; she needed to attend a range of courses to develop skills in quantitative techniques and because of course availability, found she had to attend a course on more advanced techniques before more introductory courses. Another criticism related to courses having a mix of participants. In this case, a course aimed at policy makers also had academic participants which impacted on the focus of the event and, in the participant’s view, potentially made it less accessible for some policy makers.

Other comments about events related to the importance of networking with other event attendees and having opportunities to learn from others on a

course. Several participants noted they learnt a lot from others when participants talked about their particular research dilemmas group sessions in workshops. Having participants at different stages of their career and from a range of disciplines and backgrounds was identified as helpful by most participants:

“It was nice because you were in smaller groups so then you could facilitate conversations with other people about what they were doing and what you were doing and it was really interesting doing it that way because it wasn’t just what you were doing in the workshops, it was the interaction between those people. It was nice because we had quite a diverse group, there were people who had already got their doctorates and people that hadn’t yet so there was that wide age range and wide career path which was really, really good and I think that is sometimes lacking in courses like that because people who’ve got their qualifications tend not to want to go on them. And there were people from lots of different disciplines which was really, really interesting”  
(interviewee 9, PhD student, traditional course)

## **Outcomes/Impact**

### Gaining and using methods skills/knowledge

As would be expected, one of the main outcomes was learning a specific skill or increasing practical and/or theoretical knowledge and understanding of specific methods. For some people this resulted in them making use of the methods in their current work or formulating plans for undertaking work using the specific method in the future. Some participants noted that the opportunity to discuss their own work with event facilitators in the context of a specific approach was particularly helpful in enabling them to make decisions about its use. For some participants the event consolidated or confirmed their knowledge but for others the event covered a new area. A number of these participants noted that the knowledge gained from an event meant they were prepared to ‘have a go’ at a specific technique with the recognition that they might need to do further reading or exploration of the resources that they had been provided with or seek further assistance when putting the techniques into practice; this related particularly to statistical techniques. (Participants’ confidence in using skills gained from courses/events will be explored further below). Typical responses in relation to this were:

“I’m going to try and re-analyse some data I’ve got to try and answer a particular question ... I think I will have a go and if I get stuck I will go to our statisticians”  
(interviewee 10, Senior researcher, blended learning event)

“I’ve worked on some longitudinal data with one of my colleagues [who attended the course as well], we partly did it because we wanted to become more familiar with using the software as well”  
(interviewee 13, junior academic researcher, blended learning event)

“I’ve used what I learnt in my fieldwork since the course, it was very useful”  
(interviewee 15, PhD student, blended event)

For others, the outcome was a more general understanding of an approach which participants anticipated would help them with understanding research papers or helping when commissioning research:

“I think broadly it was an appreciation of the technique, what it is attempting to do, how it does it and more importantly the limitations ... we’ve had a number of reports back from the [name of institution] on the work they’ve been doing for us and it gives me a better understanding of the conclusions they’re making based on the various tables that they’re producing for us so we can pick out, we can follow through where the advice and conclusions are coming from”  
(interviewee 17, senior Government researcher, group specific event)

I think even if I don’t use the software per se actually having the literature and an understanding of these types of analyses has been incredibly important. I think that understanding it isn’t just a matter of having a vague conceptual understanding but having had a go at the software and seeing what the outputs are means you can look at the methods section and the results section of papers and you can interpret a lot more out of it. So I think that the actual practical side of the course we were on did feed into the more theoretical understanding for me, so all of that I think I’m going to use, definitely in terms of my understanding of the literature”  
(interviewee 13, junior academic researcher, blended learning event)

“like all my statistics, I need to have a fluency with the problems and the appropriate approaches without having to know all the details”  
(interviewee 10, senior academic researcher, blended learning event)

For one person the outcome was not to put the skills or knowledge learned in practice within a particular project but to develop principles for their use in their organisation:

“We have developed our own set of principles now for reviewing literature. I wouldn’t say they are modelled on theirs but the idea of doing it came from the course. It was something we knew we should be doing and the course confirmed it”  
(interviewee 5, voluntary agency researcher, traditional course)

#### Deciding not to implement the skills/knowledge gained

The outcome for some participants attending an event to learn about a specific method was a realisation that they would not be able to use the method in their research because of a lack of time (particularly in relation to

PhD timeframes) or because of a lack of resources. This was particularly the case in relation to courses of research synthesis where several participants noted that adopting the full process was not feasible. This is not to say that these participants didn't find the courses useful. In relation to courses on research synthesis participants noted that they had either changed their approach to review as a result of the course even if they could not adopt the full systematic review process or had learnt skills they might use in the future. In relation to other courses, participants often developed clear plans to use the skills gained in the future:

"I think it taught me that systematic synthesis is an unrealistic expectation in my job. The methodology that they're teaching takes an average of 6 months to a year for one project and it's just completely unrealistic in my job. So the time and the cost of doing a proper one from start to finish is not something that I could do myself but in saying that, some of the steps in the protocol that they taught us have since come in useful so overall I think we learnt that this is not something that we can do thoroughly, it's something that we would have to hand over to someone else and even then the cost implications of that are probably outwith our reach.

(interviewee 5, voluntary sector researcher, traditional course)

"I did the course just a little bit too late. ... my salary was running out and I didn't really have the time to really go back and do a proper systematic literature review. But I think that is definitely the way forward, if I could have turned the clock back that is definitely what I would have done without a doubt... [but] I think it would be a fantastic thing to do and if I can get some more funding I will definitely do one".

(interviewee 14, PhD student, traditional event)

"[what I got from it was] basically the knowledge that it was not feasible for me to do what I wanted to do and it would not be worth my time, it would not be worth the investment of my time in trying to do it for my PhD, that what I've got is a post-doc project and not a PhD project and everybody, after listening to what I had to say, that was the feedback I got, that was the main thing I got of it and that was probably the best thing they could have told me"

(interviewee 12, PhD student, placement)

#### Events as an opportunity for reflection and clarification

Other outcomes for participants who chose not to adopt the approach they learnt about at events related to the opportunity to think through and make plans for current or further research. Attending the event appeared to provide participants with the necessary dedicated time and stimulation to think through and make decisions about their current or future research agendas. One PhD student, for example, noted how attending an event helped her to clarify her plan for her research, while a number of other researchers noted how they felt re-energised and stimulated in thinking about methodological issues:

“although I’m not actually using it in my project it made me more aware of other issues I need to consider. It got me thinking about things a lot more, it was a very stimulating day and I got a lot out of it ... the course helped me to focus in on exactly what I wanted to do”  
(interviewee 9, PhD student, traditional course)

“I think a course like that does renew your rigour, I think people do fall into bad habits”  
(interviewee 5, voluntary sector researcher, traditional course).

“It’s nice to have time aside from your day-to-day to actually focus on things like that so I think that was the most useful thing, focused time to engage with something.”  
(interviewee 4, junior researcher, traditional course).

“I liked the culture, I liked the buzz ...it was an exciting atmosphere and I came back energised from that which was useful in itself”  
(Interviewee 8, senior researcher, placement).

#### Collaboration with course tutors/event leaders

A further set of outcomes identified by participants was the opportunity to meet and make links with course tutors; some participants attended the course with this specific aim in mind. One participant made links with a course tutor while on the course which had resulted in her involving the tutor in a grant application she submitted and being identified as a co-applicant in an application submitted by the tutor. Another participant planned to contact a tutor for advice regarding her grant application. Others planned to consult tutors for expert advice should they have queries relating to the method explored at the event. Some illustrative quotes relating to this were:

“it’s re-established the connection with [tutor] and cemented that and so we are in regular contact, which on a personal research level that’s been fantastic, it’s meant being named on a bid that he’s put in and he’s also named as a reviewer for one we’re putting in. Maybe that’s not at the level that many people would have got out of it but for me personally it’s been brilliant”  
(interviewee 6, senior academic researcher, traditional course)

“It was good to meet [course tutors], to build up the contacts so if I have a problem in that area, I can get in touch with them”  
(interviewee 7, senior Government researcher, traditional course)

“I have a great sense of being able to email them anytime, they were just immensely supportive”  
(interviewee 19, PhD student, blended learning event)

#### Networking with course participants

For a small number of people one of the outcomes of attending the event was networking with other participants. Some participants made links which they intended to sustain with people who worked in similar areas to their own. As noted above, others found they learnt a great deal from the interaction with other participants during the course.

“For me it was meeting with other PhD students, I’ve actually made a contact from the course, someone working in a similar area, so that was really nice for me”

(interviewee 15, PhD student, blended event)

“It was good to meet people. I find courses useful because you make contacts, you find out how other people do their work and it was quite a high powered group”

(interviewee 7, senior Government researcher, traditional course)

### Teaching and Supervision

A further group of outcomes related to the teaching and supervision of research students. A number of participants noted that they had made use of the skills learnt and the resources provided in the teaching of methods to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Some of the teaching materials used by event tutors and provided to participants, such as interview transcripts, were used directly in teaching sessions. In other cases, participants used the resources or skills learnt to prepare teaching materials on the topic. Websites or pages providing additional resources and reading lists were viewed as particularly helpful:

“I’ve already done some teaching on the topic which included some of the references I was given”

(interviewee 6, senior academic researcher, traditional course)

“I am teaching a second year group on qualitative enquiry and I’ve used the sound clips and the transcripts. All of what I teach on that [specific method] has come from the course really”

(interviewee 2, PhD student, traditional course).

In terms of research supervision, course/event attendance encouraged some participants to consider having PhD students in the particular methodological area and the gaining of skills in the topic were seen as useful in expanding the range of methods in which supervision could be provided:

“One outcome for me is feeling that it would be nice to put together a PhD programme for someone on this methodological approach”

(interviewee 10, senior academic researcher, blended learning event)

Two participants also noted that attending the course/event helped them to think through their own teaching styles:

“The other thing you do take away as an academic, it’s really interesting to be on the other side of the table because it’s quite a reminder to oneself about how one is teaching and how one pitches it. So that’s a more general thing that’s come out of it, to reflect on one’s own teaching and what works and what doesn’t and good ideas that people have used”

(interviewee 18, junior researcher, traditional event).

### Resources

The provision of resources was also identified as an outcome of the event/course. In the previous section the use of resources in teaching was noted. Participants also noted the usefulness of reference lists and other resources in learning more about particular methods and in their writing.

### Feedback to others

The final set of outcomes relates to the dissemination of information about particular methods or skills gained from the course to other people in participants’ networks. Several participants noted that they fed back information to their colleagues in research teams, organisations or specific fora such as post-graduate forums or special interest groups.

### **Confidence using skills/knowledge**

Some participants reported that they felt confident using new skills or knowledge gained from attending courses or events. This was particularly the case (although not exclusively) where events were overviews of topics, broad introductions to approaches or focusing on developing existing skills (e.g., online methods, interviewing skills, placements). Nevertheless the resources that were made available by course providers, particularly reading lists, were viewed as very important in extending knowledge on these topics.

Other participants noted that the course they attended was really an introduction to the method and that it was only once they began to use it that they would really learn about it. This was particularly the case for courses which involved learning specific methods or software (e.g., Bayesian analysis, discourse analysis, research synthesis). Resources provided at an event were identified as important in enabling participants to practise, develop or refresh the skills they had learnt. Participants noted the importance of ‘having a go’ to see if they could use what they had learnt in practice and that resources provided were generally extensive and helpful in enabling participants to practise new skills:

“I’m starting to get into the modelling and the stats now and going back to the course notes it does help”

(interviewee 18, junior researcher, traditional event)

Several participants noted the need for support to help them with problems they experienced (or might experience) in using a method in practice. Post-course back up in the form of an individual they could contact by telephone or

email should they experience problems was identified as a potentially important resource:

“There’s a couple of support mechanisms available but I think a newsletter with examples of how it’s been used with screen shots ... or a telephone helpline or email support but it would probably need someone dedicated to doing it”  
(Interviewee 7, senior Government researcher, traditional event)

“They’re very good there about saying if you get particular issues with some data you’re working on you can phone us up and we can try and offer you some assistance and I think they had some resourcing from the ESRC to do that and I think that’s [a good way] of doing it, the post-course back-up, if it’s robust enough”  
(interviewee 1, senior academic researcher, traditional event)

Having local colleagues were knowledgeable in the area from whom advice could be sought was also viewed as very helpful when trying out new methods:

“Sitting down with my colleague, who went on the course as well, between the two of us figuring it out, it did make it possible for us to use and to do several sets of analysis, so I guess that’s the best that you can ask for  
(interviewee 13, junior academic researcher, blended learning event)

A number of participants were unable to make use of or practise the skills they had learnt immediately (some of the reasons for this will be explored in the next section) and in these contexts course resources were seen as vital in enabling participants to refresh their knowledge some time after the event.

“I felt that when I was ready to do some analysis I could probably work it out, you know they gave us the programme and manuals, and I get the feeling that I could do it now myself if I needed to”  
(interviewee 10, senior academic researcher, blended learning event)

“The resources were fantastic actually. If I went back and did it properly I’d be fine using all of that”  
(interviewee 14, PhD student, traditional event)

For participants who were unable to make use of the skills they had learnt immediately, the availability of refresher courses or post-course support were viewed as valuable:

“So that is the other way of doing it, to allow people a refresher, so to say after 2 years you can come back on a similar sort of course again to refresh or [the other way] is to have some post course provision”  
(Interviewee 1, senior academic researcher, traditional event)

Some of the courses attempted to incorporate some post course support through the use of online learning following the face-to-face course. While participants in these blended learning courses viewed this type of course design favourably there appeared to be a number of factors which limited participation in on-line follow up/learning. Issues of time or not having data or enough experience or knowledge to engage in an on-line session emerged as factors inhibiting participation. Participants to the two blended learning events included in this evaluation noted these were used by only a small minority of event participants

### **Barriers to making use of skills/knowledge**

Most participants identified barriers to making immediate use of new skills or knowledge in their research practice. A number of barriers emerged but the most common was lack of time due to pressures of work. Within academia, PhD students, as noted above, noted a lack of time to pursue new approaches within the time constraints of their PhD and staff with academic posts reported lack of time due to teaching commitments and the need to complete existing research projects or associated papers before commencing new work:

“The trouble is there are always projects to do and at that time I was in the middle of analysing the outcomes of a previous evaluation and I didn’t have the time to sit around at that time to think how I would use it. Because life’s always pressured isn’t it, really?”  
(interviewee 1, senior academic researcher, traditional event)

One of our participants was a contract researcher and he noted that the ability to make use of the new methodological skill would be dependent on finding time within a current project or being involved with a research project where the use of the particular method was appropriate:

“If I had the time I thought I could definitely apply it to look at some longitudinal analysis which I thought would be quite interesting but even then I was aware that would be dependent on getting the other stuff done and that was a big limiting factor. ... I was hoping for the potential to be able apply it and to apply the software but I was kind of aware that that would depend on what came up with my job rather than me thinking oh I’ll definitely go and use that”  
(Interviewee 13, junior academic researcher, blended learning event)

The specific point at which a course is taken in relation to other work commitments is obviously an important issue in terms of whether someone is able to develop the skills learnt within their research or teaching. Several participants noted that the timing of courses did not correspond with their specific training needs and that this sometimes meant that they were not able to make best use of the skills learnt. In some cases not being able to use the skills in the period following the course meant that people felt they would need refresher courses to be able to use the skills in practice. One participant noted that his experience of this happening following a previous course led

him to the decision to build in some days following a course to ensure that he was able to consolidate his learning:

“I think if I go back to it now, I think I would need another course [to be able use it] and what I would do now would be to actually block out a week and do the training course on 2 of those days and implement the methodology over the remaining 3. Before I had 2 days out for the course and then it was back to work. I think I would just need to have at least 4 days, one day before and one after the course so I was very clear what I needed to get out of it, basically to have a dataset that I knew very well but which I couldn't do a particular thing on because I didn't know how to use structural equation models, so prep it all beforehand, do the 2 day course, talk to the tutors about the dataset and everything and come back and do a full analysis the following day” (Interviewee 1, senior academic researcher, traditional event)

For participants outside of academia, time and the resources to apply the specific method in a rigorous fashion was an issue identified by a participant from the voluntary sector who attended a course on research synthesis:

“I guess time is the main one, resources as well. This sort of work, it's not low priority, but we have to react to support services reasonably quickly. But also our audience isn't academic, well that's not fair some of them are, but if we came out, after a year, with a 90 page academic systematic review it would eventually get whittled down to a 2 page briefing paper. Because we're dealing with very under-resourced practitioners a lot of the time and we have to produce something that is useful to them. So those are the constraints. It's not to say we couldn't get better but we're not ready to go straight into something like this. ... We're getting better, I mean this is a new programme and we've put a lot of resource into it and there is more money than there used to be but there isn't enough. I think the costs were £100,000 for a whole review and that would just be half our budget, it's just not feasible from us. It might be from a Government Department but not from us, we don't have that resource.”

(Interviewee 5, voluntary agency researcher, traditional course).

A different type of barrier identified by two participants was the need to convince colleagues of the appropriateness of a specific approach to the work being undertaken within the department before they could develop its use in their work:

“The only problem about it is that most of my colleagues would not be into Bayesian estimation. We'd have to be very careful how we used it and we'd have to justify it”

(Interviewee 7, senior Government researcher, traditional course)

“Yes in fact I immediately emailed our statisticians and said ‘we ought to get into this why don't you go on the course?’ and hoping that they

would be enthusiastic and I think they slightly resented that I was suggesting that they didn't already know how to do it ... so they didn't quite share my enthusiasm. They use a different statistical package, statisticians always have their favourite package which they are sure is the right way to do it, and they think that is the bees knees and they don't really want to learn a different one"

(Interviewee 10, senior academic researcher, blended learning event)

A barrier to making use of a new approach in his research identified by one established academic participant related to the difficulties and inappropriateness of changing direction in terms of methodological specialisation. His reason for attending the course was to gain a general understanding of a different approach rather than to use it. A PhD student put forward a contrasting view:

"I don't want to pigeon-hole myself not at the start of my career. I'm quite keen to embrace all different methodologies and I feel it's going to expand knowledge of the phenomenon that I'm interested in. So I'd be quite keen to approach the topic from several different perspectives and see how they contribute to each other"

(Interviewee 2, PhD student, traditional course)

### **Other issues**

A range of other issues were identified by participants in relation to research training and development as well as NCRM more specifically. These issues were:

- People lack knowledge about NCRM and the courses it provides, wider publicity is needed;
- There should be greater provision of research methods courses aimed specifically at practitioners and policy makers;
- More applied courses in statistical methods are needed to demonstrate how researchers can use specific methods in their research rather than their conceptual or mathematical underpinnings;
- Systems need to be developed to enable established academic staff to develop or change their methodological specialisation (and gain training to do so);
- ESRC and other funding bodies need to encourage applicants to cost in training for research staff within projects;
- People lack the time to attend courses and make use of what they have learnt; systems need to be developed so that training and development is seen as central to the activity of research active staff.

### **Conclusions**

This report has identified a range of issues that impact of people's decisions to attend NCRM events, their ability to make use of what they have learnt and the ways in which they put new skills or knowledge into practice. Some of the findings are unsurprising; one would expect one of the key reasons for people

attending courses to be to enable them to undertake a specific research activity and for time constraints to limit some people's ability to make the best use of new knowledge or skills. However, some issues that we had not considered did emerge and these have important implications for phase 2 of the study. They also raise some important issues for consideration by the Centre in relation to its TCB strategy. The key issues are discussed here.

It is interesting to learn that having 'expert' speakers at events is a significant draw to participants. It appears that there is perceived to be some added value to a course run by an expert in a method as opposed to someone who may be highly skilled but is relatively unknown. Part of the added value of 'the expert' appeared to be the opportunity to 'put a face to a name' and for participants to have the (potential) opportunity to discuss their own work and possibly to develop future collaborative work. Expert methodologists are busy people and have less time (and perhaps inclination) to run events and to collaborate with new people. It may be that ways need to be identified to maximise on larger 'master class' formats to enable more people to learn from fewer events.

There were varying views about the value of events with participants from a wide range of disciplines or backgrounds and at different career stages versus courses aimed at particular groups. Academics appeared to place high value on the learning opportunities that arise from courses with participants from different disciplines, different sectors of work and at different stages of their career. However, researchers in other sectors (Government researchers in particular but also researchers from voluntary sector organisations) have different interests, orientations and resources. NCRM has a remit to work with and to develop capacity in the academic and non-academic communities. There seems a need for some events aimed specifically at sectors of the non-academic community and to ensure that courses labelled as being for a specific group (such as policy makers) do not include academics in large numbers who may divert the focus of the course. The need has also been identified for training courses for practitioner researchers; whether NCRMs remit extends to this group is an issue for consideration.

This evaluation explored views from participants attending a range of different types of events although most had attended 'traditional' 1 or 2 day workshop-style events. It is not possible to compare the outcomes associated with different types of events from this evaluation but some observations from these data about 'non-traditional' events can be made. Blended learning events (with on-line activity following face-to-face 'teaching') provide an opportunity for event participants to consolidate their learning and it appears that this type of event is viewed favourably by participants. However, participation in follow-up e-learning activity appears to be minimal. More research is needed to explore the value of this type of event and how participation could be encouraged. Placements are another non-traditional capacity building event that some NCRM nodes offer. To date only one node has had people taking up placements and only three people have attended placements. Placements appear to have the potential to provide a rich learning experience for individuals but they are very labour intensive on the

part of staff. Participants to a placement need to be chosen very carefully to ensure that their interests are in line with those of staff at the placement site so that their learning needs can be met. Participants appear to approach placements with high expectations of what can be achieved and a detailed, agreed programme for the placement period is essential to ensure both parties (specific staff at the site and the participant) are aware of what will be provided. Given the high costs in terms of staff time and the limited benefits in terms of the numbers of people able to take up placements, further research on the costs and benefits of placements within NCRMs overall strategy is warranted.

The range of outcomes or impacts identified from attending an event is more extensive than we anticipated. These will be important in informing the design of the questionnaire for phase 2 so that we are able to maximise the identification of the range of possible outcomes that participants experience. The use of events to reach decisions about the appropriateness (or otherwise) of using a specific method is interesting as is the way in which events provide an opportunity for reflection and stimulate thinking about methodological issues. The extent to which knowledge or skills learnt from events is disseminated to students (through teaching or supervision) and to participants' networks are also important issues that will be explored through phase 2.

Some of the barriers to people making use of training have also been identified. Post-event support mechanisms (such as email or phone support) to provide a point of contact for event participants should they experience problems in putting skills into practice is clearly important and may be something NCRM needs to consider. The provision of refresher courses in some topics may also be appropriate. As noted above, more research is needed to identify the extent to which post-course e-learning can be used to support event participants.

There are clearly a range of structural constraints that inhibit people attending events and then developing or consolidating their knowledge after the event, particularly in the case of academic researchers. Lack of time, resources and incentives to change direction in methodological approach are some of the key constraints. These have been noted in other NCRM assessment exercises<sup>1</sup> (Wiles et al, 2005). This is the context in which NCRMs TCB strategy operates and is central to an understanding of its effectiveness and the impact it does and can have on individuals.

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<sup>1</sup> Wiles et al (2005) Assessment of Training Needs Final Report. Available from: <http://www.ncrm.ac.uk/publications/index.php>

## Appendix: Interview Guide

Can you begin by telling me a bit about yourself? (identify: job title/point in career lifecycle; research interests; methodological background; discipline)

Clarify what training event was attended, where and when it was held, its **format** and duration and **resources provided**

Can you tell me why you decided to attend this particular event? (explore whether there were **specific reasons for attending or whether it was general interest** in the topic; check whether the **person running the course** was a particular attraction)

How did you find out about it?

What did you hope to gain from attending it? What were your expectations? Did you have any specific aims? Did you want to gain knowledge/skills to undertake a particular research/teaching activity?

How did this event fit in with your current research/teaching/substantive interests (i.e. a new area or building on existing knowledge/skills/area of work)? [check re barriers to learning new methods if appropriate]

What did you think of the event? Did it meet your expectations? What did you gain from attending (if anything)? **What would you describe as the outcomes of attending this event for you?**

### **If negative response to the event:**

How might the event better have met you expectations?

### **If positive response to the event:**

Immediately after the event, can you recall whether you felt you wanted to make use of anything you learnt? (if so, what specifically). Were you able to do this at the time?

Have you used any of the things you learnt at the event since then? (explore re **research, teaching, supervision, discussion within team/research group** etc).

Have you any *plans* to make use of the things you learnt at the event? (including future research bids)

On the basis of the course do you feel confident that you could make use of it in the future [check whether **refresher course, phone support** would help & whether **resources provided** were adequate]

What factors do you feel have made you able/unable to make use of the things you learnt from the event?

What would have helped you to make use of them

Have you attended other training events in the broad area of research methods (apart from this one), this year?

Are there any courses on methods that you would like to see provided?

Is there anything else you would like to add about this event or about methods training for social scientists more generally?