



NCRM website user survey: questionnaires and interviews

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Introduction

The National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) was established by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in 2004 and was originally coordinated from the University of Southampton. Since 2014 NCRM has been a partnership between three universities with international reputations in methodological research and training in the social sciences: University of Southampton, University of Manchester and University of Edinburgh.

In January 2020 NCRM entered a new phase with an ESRC award for 5 years. The new phase focuses on delivering a comprehensive programme of cutting-edge research methods training across the UK and the design of a new online Training Portal. As part of the design consideration for this new Portal, NCRM has conducted an online survey and face-to-face/remote interviews in order to understand the contexts in which people use the current website (www.ncrm.ac.uk) and their requirements and expectations of the new NCRM Training Portal. We were also seeking to learn more about users' appetite for different levels of interactivity with research methods training content.

The core research questions for both survey and interviews were:

1. In what roles do respondents expect to come to the new Portal?
2. What types of activities and content are they expecting to find?
3. What is respondents' appetite for different types of interactivity in the Portal?
4. Are respondents' users of the existing NCRM website and do they have specific suggestions regarding this?
5. Which other online resources do respondents go to for research methods training content, and why?

The online survey was open from 8 January – 5 February 2020. It was constructed using LimeSurvey (www.limesurvey.org/) and advertised via the NCRM website, social media, direct email and e-bulletin. 214 responses were received.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to cover the same core topics as the survey but aimed to better understand the users' reasoning, experiences with navigation on our current website and relevant experience with other websites. The interviews were conducted between 8 January and 19 February 2020. In total we have conducted 13 interviews (combination of phone, Skype and face-to-face). An email invitation was sent to selected interview participants. The participants consisted of researchers (including early career researchers), tutors, project managers and short courses providers from governmental organisations, independent research organisations and academic institutions. An open call for interview participants was also posted on the NCRM social media but no participants were recruited via this route.

Neither the survey nor interview respondents should be considered a statistically representative samples of actual or potential NCRM online users. The existing website receives 360K page views per annum from an estimated 85.6K unique users. The Centre's resources are open and

no registration is required in order to use the online content. This report presents a summary of the survey and interview findings which will inform the development of the new NCRM Training Portal, which is due to be launched in summer 2020.

The timing of the survey and interviews was such that data collection was completed before Covid-19 lockdown measures came into force in the UK and user responses regarding face-to-face training courses, in particular, should be interpreted in light of that timing. Development of the new NCRM Portal is taking place during a period of unprecedented restrictions on travel and widespread working from home. NCRM has already begun to shift its face-to-face training programme online and there will clearly need to be a greater emphasis on online training in the short-medium term future. Those considerations are largely beyond the scope of the specific information gathered here.

The research design, survey and interviews received ethical approval from the University of Southampton, reference no. 53838.

Online survey results

The online survey was constructed using LimeSurvey. It was openly accessible and it was advertised widely in the hope of attracting both current users and potential future users. The purpose of the survey was explained to potential participants in the following terms:

“The ESRC National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) is conducting a survey of user needs and expectations to inform the design of a new Research Methods Training Portal for the social science community. This survey is for all academic and research staff, students and managers who have an interest in research methods training – either as potential users or contributors.

The following survey questionnaire asks about your role, the types of content and activities you would expect to find in the new training portal, your appetite for interactive content and any other research methods training resources which you use. If you are a user of the current NCRM website, you will be asked about any elements which you would like to retain, remove or change. The survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. The survey is anonymous. The information collected will be used to inform content, functionality and navigation of the new portal.”

Users who agreed to proceed were then led through the following set of questions; no enforced completion was used before allowing the user to proceed.

Q1 In what roles might you use the new Portal – please indicate how likely you are to have these roles (Multiple answers possible, percentages do not sum to 100%)

| | Very likely/ likely |
|--|------------------------|
| As a student on programme of study (at any level up to PhD) | 28.04% (60) |
| As a researcher with interest in specific methods (not part of a programme of study) | 86.45% (185) |
| As part of my general personal development | 71.5% (153) |
| As a teacher seeking resources and ideas for my own teaching | 56.55% (121) |
| Out of interest, with no immediate need | 36.92% (79) |

Other roles identified:

Research/line manager seeking training for staff (7); Supervisor/DTP lead seeking training for PhD students (7); Academic/Centre administrator (2); Training provider (2); Other (15)

Q2 Which of these types of online activity might you want to undertake? (Multiple answers possible, percentages do not sum to 100%)

| | Very likely/ likely |
|--|------------------------|
| Make immediate use of online content such as documents, tutorials, audio or video recordings | 93.92% (201) |
| Discover details about a specific researcher or project | 63.55% (136) |
| Find and/or register for a face-to-face training event | 73.36% (157) |
| Find and/or register for a tutored online course or webinar | 71.5% (153) |
| Obtain administrative information such as available bursaries, what the centre does, how to get involved | 59.34% (127) |
| Obtain news and updates relevant to the research methods community | 76.17% (163) |

The Very Unlikely category was no greater than 3.74% (8) for any activity.

Other activities identified:

Reports of experience using datasets/software/stories of when things go wrong 4; Online support/answers to questions/discussion groups 4; Meta-analyses of studies using research methods (research on research) 2; Support for learning developers 1; Find expert reviewers 1; Sample code/worked examples 2; Certificated training 1; Other 11

Q3 Please tell us how likely you would be to engage with the new research methods portal in the following ways (Multiple answers possible, percentages do not sum to 100%)

| | Very likely/ likely | Very unlikely/ unlikely |
|---|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Read/listen/watch site content that does not require any interaction | 94.39% (202) | 0.93% (2) |
| Make use of simple star-based scoring system for site content | 43.45% (93) | 24.76% (53) |
| Leave brief feedback on site content for attention of the owners only | 38.32% (82) | 31.77% (68) |
| Leave comments on site content that other users could see | 21.96% (47) | 49.53% (106) |
| Engage in online discussion about research methods that interested me | 38.79% (83) | 30.37% (65) |
| Sign up for online training activities (e.g. attending a webinar) that did not require active participation | 78.98% (169) | 8.41% (18) |
| Sign up for online training activities (e.g. taking part in a structured course) where tutor-participant interaction was expected | 60.28% (129) | 18.22% (39) |
| Consider contributing my own research methods content for use by others | 44.39% (95) | 29.44% (63) |

Q4 Are you a user of the current NCRM website? (One answer only, percentages do sum to 100%)

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Yes, regular user - have used several times in the last year | 24.3% (52) |
| Yes, occasional user - have probably used within the last year | 44.39% (95) |
| No | 31.31% (67) |

Q5 If you have used the current NCRM website, are there aspects you would particularly like to see retained/changed/removed? (Optional free text responses)

Things to retain. 60 responses received; retrospectively classified (some responses list multiple items, some are invalid (e.g. “yes”), so does not sum to 60)

Training and events database 37; Online resources, video, podcasts 8; NCRM briefing documents on methods, publications 6; All 3; ReStore 3; News 3; Research Festival info, presentations 2; The ‘most popular’ summary 1, Examples of other:

“I largely use your email newsletter rather than the website”

“The training directory is invaluable, and there is a wealth of information from past projects and other resources (working papers, newsletters etc) that should be retained”

“I am a casual user - find it accessible and interesting”

Things to change. 37 responses received; retrospectively classified (some responses list multiple items, some are invalid (e.g. “nothing”), so does not sum to 37)

Improved search 7 (some specific to event search); Increase availability, more syntax, update tutorial info to newer software e.g. R 5; Training and events – improved ease of use, booking, clarity of info, etc. 4; Interface design/too text-based 4; Site organization/ navigation/ indexing 3; Pages devoted to different methods/methods types 2; Eprints repository 1; Examples of other:

“an introduction page that gives an overview of the resources, mini description of subjects etc”

“more of a design issue than a content issue”

“I’m usually looking for training courses, and am always thrown off when there’s not a link on the top navigation that says ‘Training Courses’ (or similar)... I know it’s in the Learning page but it always takes more than one try to remember that”

“could look a bit slicker, and be easier to search”

Things to remove. 13 responses received; retrospectively classified (some responses list multiple items, some are invalid (e.g. “nothing”), so does not sum to 13)

The only hint of a common theme here is to remove/archive out of date content. Only valid responses are:

“Sometimes it feels like the site is talking to a very small, insular, super-nerd community of methods developers and not the wider community of social science researchers and methods users.”

“Out of date information.”

“log in features”

“Sophisticated research that will serve mainly to put research students learning off.”

“not sure about remove, but maybe archive content to keep it looking fresh.”

“Tweets feed”

Q6 Are there other websites that you use for obtaining information about Research Methods Training – please tell us of any favourites and why (Optional free text responses – 112 responses received; not all are valid (e.g. “None”, “R Package”) and some contain multiple suggestions; retrospectively classified)

Social Research Association 17 *“because they offer some really good courses”; “Prefer NCRM though as more academic-oriented”; “they have a wide range of courses, and their new guest blogger section is great, I’ve got a lot from those posts”; “they offer some good courses on methods training, sometimes it’s easier to see what their schedule for a particular regular course of interest is on their website than the NCRM website, so you can plan when in your project it makes most sense to access it.”* <https://the-sra.org.uk/>

Sage/Methodspace 12 <https://www.methodspace.com/>

Bristol MLM site 4 *“really good and comprehensive”* <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cmm/>

Royal Statistical Society 5 <https://www.rss.org.uk/RSS/Training/>

Stackexchange 3 <https://stats.stackexchange.com>

UK Evaluation Society 2 *“feel the site has improved a lot recently, good links to in depth interesting content, good for professional guidance”* <https://www.evaluation.org.uk/>

Better Evaluation 2 *“easy to navigate, well organised, covers the practicalities of doing evaluation, as well as the methods themselves, maybe feels a bit more international.”*

Individual academics’ blogs/channels (e.g. Andrew Gelman <https://statmodeling.stat.columbia.edu/>; Deborah Mayo <https://errorstatistics.com/>; Nick

Hopwood videos, interviews with well-known academics, e.g. Kathy Charmaz, Graham Gibbs, on YouTube)

YouTube (channel not specified) 6; Twitter 4; Textbook websites (not specified) 3; Essex/GESIS/Utrecht/UPF Summer Schools 2; Market Research Society 2; NatCen ; LinkedIn (formerly Lynda) 2; Coursera, Udemy, DataCamp 2; Institute of Education Sciences 2; Researchgate discussions 2

University websites (not specified) 8; Manchester 4; UCLA 3 (“Stata examples”); Portsmouth; St Mary’s Uni 1; UCL 1; Edinburgh 1; Cambridge 1; Bournemouth 1; Scottish Graduate School of Social Science 1

Examples of more discursive responses:

“If there were I wish I knew them. In terms of teaching materials I have made use and referred students to a number of videos from other universities to support a Research Methods online module I coordinate. I like the short videos by people like Chris Flip, some University of Southampton materials would be great to have one place where could access this. My university has recently got access to Sage Research Methods and this year I plan to use some of their “interviews”. For my own learning and development it would be great if you could sign up for say a short online course. Would love to attend a face to face course but venues, cost and timing have never worked out for me”

“There should be a focus on research methods for developing countries where even developing population lists is a challenge”

Interviews results

The interview schedule was structured to mirror the questions in the online survey but to add depth to the questions by asking participants to elaborate on their answers (e.g. why they prefer certain type of interaction over another). We have also asked how do they look for research methods of their interest and how they navigate on our current website (e.g. do they use the menu system/ search function/ why/ are they satisfied with the function...).

The participants were selected from our current and past colleagues, centre partners, stakeholder organisations and students related to NCRM. Participants were invited via email, participant information sheet was sent to the participants and consent form had to be signed.

Who participated

- 1 participant – ESRC/government/national
- 1 participant – non-ESRC/government/national
- 2 participants – non-ESRC/independent research organisations/national
- 6 participants – non-ESRC/academic researcher/national
- 3 participants – non-ESRC/academic early career researchers/national

In total, 13 interviews were conducted online and face-to-face.

Participants' roles

- Researcher (early career and experienced)
- Tutor
- Manager/director
- Short course provider

Participants who are short course providers use the NCRM website in a specific way:

- These participants use our website to see what courses on research methods already exist and assess whether it is worth running similar courses. *'It's a way of keeping up with what's new or what's happening in the field'*,
- One of these participants was interested in the ability to export list of courses into Excel; another participant questioned the quality of the courses, and whether there is any way that quality could be visibly evaluated; they wondered who decides which courses go on the NCRM database *'my natural assumption going to your websites is that anything that appears on NCRM is a good quality, but it might not be the case'*;
- another participant mentioned that it would be nice to be able to look at a map showing where courses are and also mentioned that *"NCRM offers fabulous service in the training database, I hope you will not change it in such a way that you will favour NCRM courses over other"*

What participants expect/want to find on the Portal

Homepage expectations:

- Participants would like to find all about their method of interest easily (ideally already from the homepage)

- 'Want to find everything about a particular method – the priority is the content';*
- 'Drive traffic via types of methods – probably the best – but not quant/qual/mix – move away from this'*
- 'I would like to see more refined search available through the homepage (so I don't miss that there is a specialised page)'*
- 'Make it clear what people can search for and how they can refine the search'*
- Home page should give clear idea of what NCRM is and offers, it should be intuitive
- 'when I land on a page I don't want to be shocked by bright colours, need to be able to easily find what am I looking for'*
- 'Homepage should give you more sense of what's actually there and who NCRM are'.*

Other expectations:

- Participants expect to find both audio and video resources (one participant suggested that videos could be less passive, e.g. presenter could suggest to viewers to pause the video and reflect on the concepts)
- Main texts in specific theme should be found easily (e.g. main texts and authors for focus groups)
- Advanced and core training
- Training resources – articles, guides, activity sheets, worksheets, sample data, sample analysis, interactive e-books, recorded lectures
- 'Extended directors cuts' – more insight, something that cannot find its way into a traditional resource
- Innovation – NCRM as a thought leader – frontier of methodology – feature famous methodologists, creative, distractive methods, maybe 1x month talks about new innovative methods
- News are important, keeping the page alive
- "Its good to have newsy things on the front site – to prompt you/distract/inspire/keeps things current/ good place to go to know what is happening in the world of methods";*
- "I don't read the news section but I do read the newsletter so if there is important news I feel like it should be going out in a newsletter"*
- Keep the training database
- Make sure 'research' is linked to training and research doesn't disappear from our website
- "Training is about people learning and people learn by engaging with research. They don't just learn through courses and guides, they learn through having access to papers, research reports data etc!"*
- "Its absolute travesty if research is not on the website."*
- *"Signposting! E.g. say UKDS has something on this... signposting people to third parties... NCRM should have this centre coordinating role. ..This could be done by having links at the end of each page saying - links to external resources on this topic can be found on..."*

Search engine experience/expectations and navigation

Participants have both good and bad experience with the NCRM search engine.

Good: some people reported having good experience when using appropriate keywords

"I found Google useless because there is no time control, so you get old results"

Opportunities for improvement:

"There is a sense that you are missing the information that you need because you don't know where to find it"

"Sometimes I know something is there but cannot find it in search -not even in advanced search- or it is offering me old courses"

"Sometimes google works better than the NCRM home page search"

Advanced search – make it clear what people can search for and how they can refine the search – ability to search by method (e.g. all on focus groups) and by type of resource (e.g. all training on focus groups, or all video videos, audio, papers on focus groups etc.)

"I would improve the way search results appear, sometimes there is a big gap and you have to scroll down a lot, it's not as neat as it could be, it could be easier to navigate"

Other comments on how people navigate

- Following a link (e.g. from an email or social media)
 - Using tabs, top navigation – participants find them easy to navigate
 - Organisation of content – e.g. resources tab - helpful but hard to understand the division – publications are under resources and training is under resources too
- "It's not necessary to have working papers separate from reports. Conceptually I wouldn't think about them differently. And again, have the option to filter them – e.g. quants qual, review papers"*

Suggestions for our training page

- Include number of days (how long course lasts) in the course listing page
- Make training description clearer

Appetite for interaction

Ranking – about half and half participants interested/not interested – some comments

"there is too much rating going on in academic world and it is not helpful",

"I am suspicious of rating", "I don't know how valuable that is – I wouldn't do it, maybe on YouTube thumbs up and down, .. the research I did showed that there is a great diversity in methods learners so rating is a bit of a tricky area where lots of people may not like a piece of training, but it could really be great for certain subset. It would be bad if the search is privileging something with higher rating. But there might be a use in seeing how many people have used something"

Ranking on its own might not be enough, maybe comments attached to it and when

people are ranking ask them 'are you sure you want to submit this without any comments'

Feedback/comments – participants would usually comment only if the resource was rather brilliant, awful or misleading, most would comment only if comments are for the attention of the website owner only. Interesting quotes

"I don't like the language that sometimes is portrayed on internet in comments or feedback, some not so good and respectful language",

*"Some NCRM videos sometimes I see that people ask questions that are not answered",
"a lot of comments can be useless but if you can get expert commentary that is focused and shaped by strong terms and conditions so like for example the Financial times have strong discussion board... but somebody has to marshal that content so you have to have resource for people to moderate it"*

"For somebody who made a video in all honesty I don't know if I want for people to have the option to debate it."

Discussions – most participants would not engage in a discussion or only if the method was of high interest and the discussion would be specific and moderated (*"Moderator is a skilled job!"*). One participant mentioned that there is in general so little time available for academics that joining discussions is not possible

Webinars – participants like webinars, some prefer with some without interaction – the pedagogy of the webinar should dictate whether interaction is needed or not. Participation must be very specific, moderated and on point, e.g. have a very specific time bounded task and tutor or moderator must be able to respond. If participants are not interested in interaction they can *"simply ignore it"*.

Important comment for webinars and discussions

"Interacting with resources – all depends on what are the pedagogical goals of each resource... if course is about reflection and critical thinking and collaborating together, discussion is a key part of the course but if you are teaching somebody to teach R well people might find it useful to ask but there is lots already available online"

Contribution to the portal – participants are interested (however, there are issues with contributing own materials – a) time; b) funding restrictions; c) who owns intellectual property

"people are intellectually keen and happy to do that but are confused about the nature of putting stuff in public and how that fits with the university intellectual property"

Other websites for research methods content

- Methods journals
- Higher Education Academy website
- Specific project websites
- Specific articles and books

- Centre for multilevel modeling (Bristol) because it is very clear, it has good examples and I you email them people respond to you
- SRA
- MRS Market Research Society (unhelpful because it doesn't show price of the course)
- Society for research in HE
- Wikipedia (Eva's note – NCRM should be on Wikipedia...)
- Sage website *'has a lot of stuff'*
- UCL statistical consultant
- Datacamp

Other interesting comments

"People are bored of the constant focus on theoretical development without ever actually doing proper work"

"There could be more methodological contribution from PhD students – I don't think PhDs have a default understanding that they can contribute solely on methodological grounds"

"You should do a quick user testing when you have a mockup of the website.. do it before you get too fixed on a design so that you are still flexible to change stuff"

"For me what the sort of value of the National Centre for Research Methods is in some of its horizon scanning methodological work. For example, looking at decolonized/postcolonized methods, stuff around secondary data analysis that's leading and difficult to access through MA course. ..diary methods or video based methods – tend to be very little training available"

"When I came to share the link I was pushed through 'add this'.. question for NCRM is about data, in terms of people using the site, how their data is used. There is a FB button, but Facebook collect data about our users. NCRM should have a big think about whether we need giving social media giants data on our users or whether more easily people could be copying links and sending them themselves. Like I think the email link is important. People can tweet stuff without a tweet button. But tweet button I find less offensive than FB because there is now more knowledge about the data they are collecting."

One participant suggested that NCRM could start compiling online databases of other resources (not just training) e.g. a database of funding for training, database of webinars, or summer schools in methods, or all methodological conferences, or expand the training database internationally (listing courses from Europe as well as UK or worldwide)

"The website needs modernization, it looks nice but if you compare it to other website it looks a bit outdated. Also, some of the resources needs to be updated as some of them looks like they were made in the 90s."

Using survey results to inform development of the new Training Portal

Users come to the NCRM website in a wide range of roles and many users have multiple roles. Respondents represented a good spread between regular, occasional and non-users of the current NCRM site. The most common reason for visiting is as a researcher with an interest in a specific research method. Users seeking to enhance their own personal development and to find resources to enhance their own teaching also figure largely and these all rank ahead of use by students engaged in programmes of study. Substantial proportions of users also engage in each of the identified purposes – these include finding and making immediate use of online content, finding and registering for training events – both online and face-to-face and finding out news and updates relevant to the research methods community more widely.

There is almost universal interest in reading/watching/listening to content that does not require any interaction. High levels of interest in signing up for online training activity and contributing own content. There is quite a weak interest in leaving public comments. There is a wide diversity of attitudes to engaging in online discussion, with a slight majority likely to engage. It is recognised that interaction (comments, discussions) require a moderator which is a skilled job.

Although some users were likely to engage with all the modes of interaction suggested in the survey, it is notable that only 22% were likely/very likely to leave comments on site content that other users could see, while 94% were likely/very likely to read/listen/watch site content that does not require any interaction.

The findings of the survey and questionnaires are broadly consistent, although semi-structured interviews obviously provided greater opportunity to ensure that respondents understood the terms being used and purposes of the research. Through both instruments, there is some evidence of users wanting things that are actually very difficult to combine, for example a much simpler home page but which also highlights those things of greatest interest to the specific user. There is also the inevitable wide diversity of opinions on visual design matters (not explicitly the focus of this research) such as the use of colours and images.

As might be expected, users have a wide diversity of views about those aspects of the current website they would like to see retained, changed or removed. There were clear messages that NCRM should preserve the principal existing resources such as our training and events database, online resources, news, ReStore and Research Festival information. However, users identified a range of desirable improvements in moving from the current website to the new Portal, including:

- less text heavy homepage, modern design
- ability to find all about users' method of interest quickly directly from the homepage
- advanced search available from homepage
- homepage should give more sense of what is available and who NCRM are
- preserve all existing resources (possibly update older ones) keep adding new resources and e-learning materials
- preserve connection to research

- signpost to external resources, update links to external resources
- improve search tool, make sure it is possible to search by method and by type of resource
- offer more online training
- improve training database (e.g. include number of days – how long training lasts in the training search result, make training description clearer
- preserve news section and email news, focus on innovation in methods

Despite the primary focus of this research on understanding user interaction with the NCRM web presence, users also made suggestions which are relevant for the design of future training materials and resources, for example:

- reports on using specific methods and software tools
- stories of when things go wrong
- support for learning developers

Some users' suggestions are for services or resources which are outside the scope of NCRM's remit, or which are based on a misunderstanding of the mission of the Centre (for example suggestions to remove sophisticated methods which will deter students). Although these indicate that there is merit in more clearly signposting the Centre's objectives on the website, it is inevitable that users e.g. using Google to directly access individual pages will not usually invest effort in reading pages containing organisational information about the Centre.

A final aspect which has proved very useful has been to gain some insight into the wide range of other websites from which users seek research methods advice, and to understand more about what makes popular sites popular. The sites mentioned cover a very wide range of resource types spanning publisher pages such as Sage MethodSpace, training provider sites such as the Market Research Society and individual authors' YouTube and blog pages. While not seeking to replicate everything that these resources provide, the NCRM team have visited many of the suggested sites with the objective of understanding those features and design elements which users report to be most helpful.

The information gained from this survey is being used to develop the new NCRM Training Portal.

Some very specific messages such as the production of a new, modern design with less text on the home page, employing a new search engine and retaining those major components which users have identified as being key resources. Many of these developments will be available for the launch of the new research methods Portal, while others will need to be developed over time (for example, those that might require changing the content and structure of the information to be provided by all training providers contributing to the training and events database). This research exercise has helped us to better understand the contexts in which people use our current website, their requirements and expectations of the new training Portal and provided some insights as to whether and how users are interested to interact with online content.

The information gathered is also complemented by user information which NCRM already collects using Google Analytics, for example that a quarter of website visits are now made from mobile devices.