

ESRC National Centre for Research Methods

Evaluating the impact of NCRM Training and  
Capacity Building Activities

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## **1. 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 methodological developments arising from the Node's research programmes, 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
- 'Roadshows'
- 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 evaluation set out 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. A range of overlapping initiatives is being undertaken in research methods by the ESRC, including the NCRM, Researcher Development Initiative (RDI), Research Methods Programme (RMP) and National Centre for e-Social Science (NCeSS). This, together with any other changes in background conditions, gives rise to an attribution problem. There are also onerous general demands on data collection for a rigorous quantitative evaluation study comparing 'treatment' and 'control' groups. We therefore undertook a more modest approach, aiming to explore participants' perceptions of whether and how they benefited, coupled with collecting data on aspects of the process by which we think NCRM courses operate.

This evaluation has been 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.

## 2. Phase one: qualitative study

### 2.1 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 qualitative 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:

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

Table 1: Proposed Sample

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:

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
Total	16	3

Table 2: Interviewees: Sector of Employment

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	1	1	0
Total	5	7	7

<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

Table 3: interviewees: Current Posts

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.

It was not the intention 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.

## 2.2 Findings

### 2.2.1 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)

### **2.2.2 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)

### **2.2.3 Outcomes/Impact**

#### 2.2.3.1 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)

### **2.2.3.2 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)

### **2.2.3.3 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).

#### **2.2.3.4 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)

#### **2.2.3.5 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)

### **2.2.3.6 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).

### **2.2.3.7 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.

### **2.2.3.8 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.

#### **2.2.4 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 who 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

### **2.2.5 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)

### **2.2.6 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.

### **2.3 Conclusions**

A number of key findings emerged from this qualitative study in relation to the reasons for attending events, the outcomes of attendance, confidence with using new knowledge or skills and barriers to making use of new knowledge or skills. Learning about an approach in order to undertake a specific research activity or to expand more general knowledge appeared key reasons for deciding to attend events. However, the status of the event presenters also appeared a significant feature in participants' decisions to attend specific events. A wide range of outcomes from attending events were reported. As well as learning a specific skill or increasing understanding of a method, networking with course tutors and participants, gaining skills and resources for teaching or supervision and having an opportunity for clarification and reflection were outcomes identified. There appeared to be a number of barriers to putting skills into practice. These included: lack of time due to work or PhD time pressures; lack of resources; lack of support within participant's own organisations and the difficulties in developing new directions in research methods for established researchers. The need for post-course support to enable participants to put skills into practice was viewed as important. Possible support mechanisms were identified as telephone or email support or refresher courses.

The qualitative study also indicated the different needs and experiences of researchers from different employment sectors and, to a lesser degree, at different career stages. Researchers working in Government and the voluntary sector have different needs to academic researchers in relation to methodological knowledge and skills. Researchers working in the voluntary sector also may have different levels of resources with which to put approaches into practice. Both these factors appeared to impact on the extent to which participants from these sectors perceived benefit from attending events alongside academics and were able to put what they had learnt into practice. There was some indication that PhD students and contract researchers may also be limited in their ability to put new skills into practice. The importance of learning about research approaches at an appropriate time within the timeframe of a PhD also emerged as important.

These findings highlight some interesting issues which are relevant in their own right. However they also raise specific issues for informing the design of the survey for phase 2 of this work.

## **3. Phase 2: Survey**

### **3.1 Introduction to Phase Two**

The qualitative study excluded participants at seminar and consultation type events because it was felt that the impacts of attending such events would be less marked than events specifically geared to training. However, it was agreed by the NCRM Management Board that participants at all Centre TCB activities should be included in the survey in order that NCRM might evaluate both training *and* capacity building. These events include seminars, roadshows and presentations as well as the range of events that were included in the qualitative evaluation which have a more direct 'training' orientation.

A survey was designed to explore the impact of NCRM's TCB program, drawing on the results of the qualitative study outlined above. The questionnaire utilised is given as appendix A to this document.

Impact was measured by asking for participants' perceptions of the benefit from the course / event (questions 4-6), with information gathered on whether they thought they benefited and how. These questions drew on the findings of the qualitative phase of the study. We were interested to examine results for quantitative and qualitative courses separately, by career stage, and also by year. The survey also collected information on various respondent characteristics (questions 1, 2, 7, 9, 10, 13) relevant to NCRM's underlying model. In particular, NCRM courses are intended as (relative to other ESRC initiatives) having advanced or innovative content, as helping participants to conduct research, as having a particular focus (relative to other ESRC initiatives) on supporting postdoctoral researchers across the career trajectory, and as having a regional dimension.

### 3.2. Procedure

The survey was administered online with email solicitation, and was a census of all 935 NCRM event participants in the period of its inception in 2005 to February 2007. A personalised form of salutation was used, incorporating the participant's title where this had been collected, and the course attended. The mails were sent with a message from NCRM's director. Responses were collected over a 2-month period to September 2007 and were anonymous.

Although all NCRM events were covered by the survey, in 2005 a substantial proportion (50%) were 'roadshow' events undertaken for network-building purposes by the 'Qualiti' node of NCRM. These respondents comprise 23% of the sample overall. These event form a different category from other training and capacity-building (TCB) events in terms of their intended impact. Responses to questions relating to impact from roadshow attendees are therefore given separately to those for the other events, as Appendix C to this document. Roadshow respondents are included in the sample characteristics so that these reflect as comprehensively as possible who it is that NCRM's training and capacity-building program has reached.

### 3.3 Sample

277 responses were received in total, 214 from regular events and 63 from roadshow participants. This represents an overall response rate of 30%. 70% of respondents were female. Further respondent characteristics are set out in the tables below.

Table 4 shows respondents' occupation by institution or sector. By far the largest respondent occupation is academic, with some representation of government and research institute staff.

	n	%
University/College	232	84
Research Institute	19	7
Government	12	4
Private Sector	3	1
Voluntary Sector	5	2
Freelance	3	1
Other	3	1

Table 4: Occupation (question 1)

Table 5 shows respondents' career stage. Over 1/3 of respondents were PG students and 1/3 junior researchers. More advanced career stages are progressively less represented.

	n	%
PG Student	98	35
Junior Researcher	92	33
Senior Researcher	49	18
Professor / Reader etc <sup>1</sup>	17	6
Other	21	8

Note

1. Categories were defined as “PG Student, Junior Researcher (e.g. Research Officer, Research Fellow, Lecturer), Senior Researcher (e.g. Senior Research Officer, Senior Lecturer), Professor / Reader / Head of Unit / Director, other.”

Table 5: Career stage (question 2)

Table 6 shows the age profile of respondents. The most common age group is between 30 and 39 years of age. There are relatively few respondents over 60.

	N	%
20-29	54	20
30-39	105	38
40-49	66	24
50-59	39	14
>=60	12	4

Table 6: Age (question 9)

Table 7 shows where respondents were living at the time they attended a course. London is the most common respondent origin, followed by the North East and the Midlands.

	N <sup>1</sup>	%
London	47	17
South-West	24	9
South-East	30	11
Midlands	35	13
North-West	26	9
North-East	44	16
Wales	17	6
Scotland	23	8
Northern Ireland	11	4
Other	19	7

Note

1. One response is missing.

Table 7: Residence (Question 7A)

Table 8 shows the respondent's primary disciplinary affiliation. The largest single discipline of respondents is sociology. 81% of respondents are captured by the social science taxonomy. There is a large set of 'other' responses, comprising just under 20% of responses. Health-related disciplines account for over 40% of these.

Discipline <sup>1</sup>	N	%
Demography	1	0
economic and social history	1	0
economics	15	5
education	30	11
environmental planning	2	1
human geography	7	3
linguistics	1	0
management and business studies	8	3
methods and computing	1	0
political science and international studies	6	2
psychology	35	13
science and technology studies	9	3
social anthropology	3	1
social policy	24	9
social work	3	1
socio-legal studies	5	2
sociology	50	18
statistics	23	8
Other	51	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Other includes:<sup>2</sup></b>		
Ecology / environmental science	4	1
Health services or science	22	8
epidemiology	5	2
medicine	4	1
IT	2	1

Table 8: Disciplinary Affiliation

Notes

1. The table uses an ESRC taxonomy of social science disciplines.
2. 'Other' disciplines with less than two respondents are not shown.

### 3.4 Results

Results are set out in two sections below. Section 3.4.1 details results informative about the impact of NCRM’s program of events. Section 3.4.2 contains results on the preferred timing and location of courses.

#### 3.4.1 Results Relevant to Impact

This section sets out results informative about the impact of NCRM courses, in terms of respondents’ perceptions of the difference attendance it made to them, and about the process by which NCRM courses operate. Roadshow results are excluded as explained on p16 above, but appear as Appendix C. Section 3.4.1.1 incorporates two cross-sectional comparisons. The first is between qualitative and quantitative courses; responses from mixed methods courses are dropped making this comparison. The second is between “early” and “late” career-stage respondents. Early career respondents are defined by question 2 as those selecting either of the options “Junior Researcher (e.g. Research Officer, Research Fellow, Lecturer)” or “PG student” as their job description at the time of the event. Later career respondents are defined by the same question as those selecting either “Senior Researcher (e.g. Senior Research Officer, Senior Lecturer)” or “Professor / Reader / Head of Unit / Director.” Section 3.4.1.2 compares responses to courses which took place in different years.

##### 3.4.1.1 Overall results and Cross-Sectional Comparisons

Table 9 reports respondents’ reasons for attending the event, as percentages who gave each reason. Overall the most common response is A, to learn methods necessary to conduct a specific research task, followed by D, to learn about developments in a particular area of research methods, but the pattern appears to differ between quantitative and qualitative courses, and by the career stage of the respondent. The most common reason given in addition to A-D was the authority status of the speaker (3 responses).

“What were your reasons for attending the event?”

A: To learn methods necessary to conduct a specific research task

B: To assess the feasibility of using a particular method for a specific research task

C: To gain methodological resources such as reading lists, other documents and links that I use or plan to use

D: To learn about developments in a particular area of research methods

Response	Overall <sup>1</sup>	Quantitative	Qualitative <sup>2</sup>	Early Career <sup>3</sup>	Late Career <sup>3</sup>
A (%)	48	57	40	48	45
B	35	34	39	40	21
C	28	27	31	27	30
D	45	30	63	41	60
N	214	116	75	143	53

#### Notes

1. Table shows the percentage of respondents who ticked each response. Roadshow events have been dropped. Because multiple selections were allowed the percentages do not sum to 100.

2. Results for ‘Mixed Methods’ events have been dropped for this comparison.

3. The early and late career categories combine PGs with junior researchers, and senior researchers with professor / reader etc., from Q2. The “other” responses have been dropped for this comparison.

Table 9: Reasons for Attending the Event (question 3)

Table 10 shows respondents' perceptions of whether they had benefited. Overall 94% say they had and this picture does not vary across quantitative and qualitative methods, nor by career stage.

“Do you think the course has benefited you?”

%	Overall <sup>1</sup>	Quantitative	Qualitative	Early Career	Late Career
Yes	94	95	93	94	94
No	6	5	7	6	6
N	214	116	75	143	53

Table 10: Perceived Benefit (question 4)

Table 11 shows respondents' perceptions of how they benefited. The 7 categories of benefit were taken from phase 1 of our research. Responses are consistent with Table 10 and are in general concentrated in the upper half of the table ('moderately' to 'greatly'). Responses are shown separately for early and late career researchers.

“How much have you benefited in the following ways?”

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| A: Increased ability to do research              | E: Networking with course participants   |
| B: Increased knowledge about research methods    | F: As a source of references / resources |
| C: Opportunity for clarification and reflection  | G: As an input to teaching & supervision |
| D: Engagement with course tutors / event leaders |  |

% <sup>1,2</sup>	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	G: Early Career	G: Late Career
Greatly	8	14	20	15	6	18	4	2	6
Significantly	30	42	43	31	14	28	9	8	14
Moderately	37	36	26	26	30	27	20	18	30
Slightly	20	6	9	19	28	21	17	13	24
Not at all	2	1	1	7	21	3	16	20	8
N / A	4	2	2	4	3	4	36	39	18

Notes

1. This question was administered only to the 94% of subjects who said they had benefited.
2. Missing data were dropped before calculating percentages.

Table 11: Manner of Benefit (question 4.i)

Table 11 is shown graphically in Figure 1 below, with each benefit category represented by a stacked column.

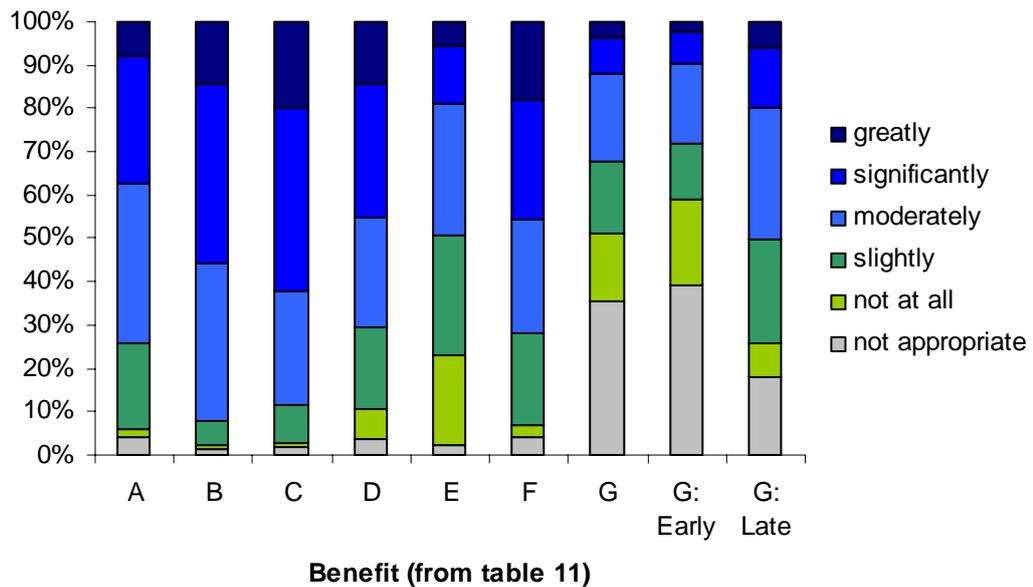


Figure 1: Manner of Benefit

Table 12 shows reasons why a respondent had *not* benefited, had he or she answered ‘no’ to question 4. The modal reason given was that the course was too advanced.

“You said that you do not think you benefited from attending this event. Why was this?”

Reason	N <sup>1</sup>
It is too soon after the event	0
no post-course support	2
the content was too advanced	5
the content was too basic	0
the course was of poor quality	3
there has been no opportunity to pursue issues/topics from the course	3
other: mismatch between course content and expectations <sup>2</sup>	3
other	1

n=13

Notes

1. This question was only administered to those answering ‘no’ to question 4.
2. This response category was constructed ex-post from the free-response option (“other”).

Table 12: Reasons for not benefiting (question 4.ii)

Table 13 shows whether respondents reported making use of the methods that were covered by an event. Most subjects responded positively in each cross-section.

“Have you made use of the methods that were covered after the event?”

%	Overall <sup>1</sup>	Quantitative	Qualitative	Early Career	Late Career
Yes	61	66	56	61	62
No	39	34	44	39	38
N	214	116	75	143	53

Table 13 Use of Methods Covered (question 5)

Table 14 shows whether respondents expected to make use of a method which was covered in the future, had they had not already done so. Most subjects, in each cross-section, reported that they did.

“If not, do you expect to make use of them in the future?”

% <sup>1</sup>	Overall <sup>1</sup>	Quantitative	Qualitative	Early Career	Late Career
Yes	56	56	55	59	70
No	12	5	15	11	5
Don't Know	32	38	30	30	25
N	84	39	33	56	20

Note

1. This question was only administered to respondents answering ‘no’ to question 5.

Table 14: Expectations of future use (question 5.i)

Table 15 shows how respondents reported using a method. Categories A, B, and C are research uses, D and E are teaching-related uses. Responses are concentrated in the research uses categories.

“You said that you have used the methods covered by the event. How have you used them?”

A: In research intended for publication

B: In a research proposal

C: In a research project

D: In teaching

E: In supervision of students

Use % <sup>1,2</sup>	Overall <sup>1</sup>	Quantitative	Qualitative	Early Career	Late Career
A	44	50	37	41	45
B	25	18	29	26	24
C	72	74	76	75	58
D	17	11	20	15	24
E	10	11	7	8	15
N	130	77	42	87	33

Note

1. This question was administered only to those answering ‘yes’ to question 5.

2. Because multiple selections were allowed the percentages do not sum to 100.

Table 15: Mode of Use (question 5.ii)

Table 16 reports respondents opinions of whether it is possible to improve one's research capabilities by attending the kind of course they attended. Most subjects responded positively in each cross-section.

“Do you think you can significantly improve your ability to do research by taking courses like this one?”

%	Overall	Quantitative	Qualitative	Early Career	Late Career
Yes	88	93	87	87	92
No	3	2	1	3	2
Don't Know	9	5	12	10	6
N	214	116	75	143	53

Table 16: Impression of Potential Benefits of NCRM courses (question 6)

### 3.4.1.2 Results by Year

Table 17 below breaks down responses to questions 4, 5, 5.i and 6 respectively by year. The results for each question seem to differ between 2005 events and those occurring later.

Questions 4, 5, 5.i and 6 by Event Year

%	2005	2006	2007
Q4	“Do you think the course has benefited you?”		
Yes	87	95	94
No	13	5	6
Q5	“Have you made use of the methods that were covered after the event?”		
Yes	53	61	64
No	47	39	36
Q5.i	“If not, do you expect to make use of them in the future?”		
Yes	29	61	63
No	21	12	5
Don't Know	50	27	32
Q6	“Do you think you can significantly improve your ability to do research by taking courses like this one?”		
Yes	73	89	92
No	3	4	2
Don't Know	23	7	6
N (Qs 4, 5, 6)	30	131	53
N (Q 5.i)	14	51	19

Table 17: Questions 4, 5, 5.i and 6 by Event Year

### 3.4.2 Results on Preferred Timing and Location of Courses

Table 18 shows how subjects rated the importance of regional provision of events. The modal rating was ‘very important,’ with progressively fewer responses for options indicating less importance.

“How important is it to you to have training events put on in your region?”

	n	%
Very Important	133	48
important	86	31
Not important	47	17
Don't know	9	3

Table 18: Importance of Regional Events (question 7)

Table 19 shows participants’ preferred timing of events. The distribution of preferred months appears to be rather uniform with the exception of the less favoured month of December.

“When is the best time during the year for you to attend training events?”

	% <sup>1</sup>
January	10
February	12
March	10
April	9
May	8
June	13
July	13
August	10
September	9
October	7
November	10
December	4
It Varies	25
No Preference	34

Note

1. Because multiple selections were allowed the percentages do not sum to 100.

Table 19: Preferred Timing of Events (question 14)

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Interpretation of Results Relevant to Impact

We interpret the results relevant to the impact of NCRM's TCB program in two stages. Section 4.1.1 examines the overall results and cross-sectional comparisons. Section 4.1.2 examines the results compared by year.

#### 4.1.1 Overall Results and Cross-Sectional Comparisons

This section considers overall results and cross-sectional comparisons. This involves, firstly, examining the fit of the sample characteristics and data on regional provision to NCRM's underlying model (4.1.1.1). Secondly, we examine data relevant to the counterfactual – that is, respondents' perceptions of the difference that attending an event has made (4.1.1.2). This is also considered separately for quantitative and qualitative courses, and early and late career stages.

##### 4.1.1.1 Sample Characteristics

The first question is whether NCRM's events are primarily reaching its main target groups. The following remarks are tentative because we only have responses from around 1/3 of participants; respondents might not be very representative. A comparison with complete registration data on gender and career stage, which we have only for the roadshow events (N=576), revealed one category of respondent that may be under-represented in the sample. It seems that senior researchers are relatively unlikely to respond since they constitute 19% of these participants but only 8% of the relevant responses. However, the distribution of respondents by career stage is not significantly different to that of registered participants according to a chisquare test ( $\chi^2(4) = 5.84, p > 0.2$ ).

Firstly, we consider respondents by occupation. Table 4 shows, predictably, that respondents were mainly (84%), but not exclusively, in academia. However, it should be remembered that more than 1/3 of the sample consists of postgraduate students, many of whom may migrate to other professions. Excluding postgraduates the split between academia and other sectors is 75% - 25%. This is consistent with NCRM's broad remit to provide training for academics but also to reach out beyond this group.

Secondly we consider disciplinary affiliation. From Table 8, 81% of respondents fall within a standard ESRC taxonomy for the social science disciplines, so most recipients of NCRM TCB can be classified as social scientists. That around 1/5 of respondents fall outside this taxonomy might be regarded as rather high but it should be borne in mind that the disciplines listed, with the likely exception of IT, may have substantial social science dimension(s).

Thirdly, we consider whether NCRM is effective at supporting researchers across the career trajectory. From Table 6, only 20% of respondents are under 30. However, since Table 5 shows that 68% of the sample consists of postgraduates (35%) and junior researchers (33%), this may largely reflect the extent of late entry into the research labour market. Overall, therefore, the evidence suggests that our program is attracting early to mid-career researchers in particular. The proportion of postgraduate students in our sample might be seen as higher than expected, to the extent that research methods training is integrated into postgraduate degrees by the institutions that offer them. One possible reason is that postgraduates, especially at PhD level, have rather diverse training needs by topic and level, which may make them difficult to cater for as intake groups.

Finally we consider whether the regional aspect of NCRM's TCB program is appreciated. From Table 18, 80% of respondents reported that it was either important or very important to have regional provision, with very important the most common response (48%). The importance of the regional aspect of the program is therefore confirmed judging by respondents' perceptions.

#### 4.1.1.2 Evidence on Perceptions of Benefit

From Table 10, the overwhelming majority of respondents report benefiting from course attendance. This does not vary across qualitative and quantitative events, nor by career stage. Four questions are relevant to *how* participants benefited, reported in tables 11, 13, 14 and 15.

From Table 11, it is notable that responses are in general concentrated in the upper half of the table. This does not vary significantly between quantitative and qualitative courses / events. It is also notable that the only exceptions to this general picture occur in two columns, one of which, column E, networking with course participants, and column F, as inputting to participants' teaching and supervision. These may plausibly be seen as less central purposes of course provision. Exploring column F further, table 9 suggests that results here are largely driven by the "early" career researchers in the sample. The distributions for "early" and "late" career categories are significantly different ( $\chi^2(4) = 16, p < 0.003$ )<sup>1</sup>, with late career researchers benefiting relatively more. This is perhaps to be expected with the less extensive and less regular teaching commitments of postgraduates and with less emphasis on supervisory duties for junior researchers. It is notable that the proportion of respondents who selected "not appropriate" for teaching-related benefits is equal (39%) between postgraduate students and junior researchers.

From Table 13, the majority of respondents report using the methods that were covered in the event subsequently. A 95% confidence interval for this proportion for the sample as a whole is  $0.54 < p < 0.68$ .<sup>2</sup> There is no evidence that this proportion varies across quantitative and qualitative events, nor by career stage. From Table 14, most respondents who had not used the methods nonetheless expected to use them in future. A 95% confidence interval for this proportion for the sample as a whole is  $0.45 < p < 0.67$ . Combining these figures, 83% of respondents either used or expected to use the methods covered (95% confidence interval  $0.80 < p < 0.88$ ). Looking at *how* the methods were used, Table 15 shows a general concentration of responses reporting research uses as opposed to teaching or supervision. The comparison between early and late career data for this table is consistent with the data in table 9 (that is, a greater proportion of late career respondents reported this use) but not statistically significant, nor is there any significant difference between quantitative and qualitative categories. We interpret these results as consistent with NCRM courses functioning effectively as envisaged. Finally, question 6 asked respondents' opinions on the potential for courses of this type to enhance research competence. The majority of responses, 88%, were positive, with 95% confidence interval of  $0.84 < p < 0.92$ .

Regarding other aspects of whether NCRM courses function as intended, it is notable that of respondents who reported *not* benefiting from an event, *none* chose the option that the course

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<sup>1</sup> The data form an ordered set excepting the 'N/A' category. Where it was necessary (for the chisquare test) to combine bins to obtain expected frequencies greater than 5, recombination respected ordinality. In table 9, for example, the "greatly" bin for column F was combined with the "significantly" bin. Where necessary N/A entries were, in contrast, discarded.

<sup>2</sup> Confidence intervals for proportions, and differences in proportions, are calculated using the familiar formulae  $p = p \pm 1.96 (p(1-p)/N)^{1/2}$  and  $p_1 - p_2 = (p_1 - p_2) \pm 1.96 ((p_1(1-p_1)/N_1) + (p_2(1-p_2)/N_2))^{1/2}$  respectively.

was too basic (Table 12), though it should be noted that only 13 respondents fall into this category. The most common explanation was rather that a course was too advanced. This is, tentatively, consistent with the characterisation of NCRM events as providing higher-than-basic level training and / or innovative methodological content.

Table 9 reports respondents' reasons for attending the event. Overall, there is strong evidence that these responses are not equally distributed across reasons ( $\chi^2(3) = 14.8$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), and as one might expect the reasons reflecting a desire to enhance knowledge, understanding or skills (A, B and D) each attract more responses than the teaching-related reasons (C). There are statistically significant differences between responses for qualitative and quantitative events, however. In particular, the most general reason concerning knowledge and understanding, category D, is the modal response for qualitative events whereas the 'skill' category, A, is modal for quantitative ones ( $\chi^2(3) = 12.3$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ). A similar pattern is evident for late and early career stage, respectively ( $\chi^2(3) = 7.3$ ,  $p = 0.063$ ). Since qualitative event respondents are a higher proportion of early (54%) than late (43%) career respondents, it seems that reasons for attendance may differ across both type of event and career stage.

#### 4.1.2 Results By Year

To identify differences over time we compare results for 2005, the first year, with 2007, the last. We are interested to see, for example, how the likelihood that a respondent has used a method changes over time (question 5). Use of a method is necessarily increasing over time. However, the results in Table 17 for question 5 appear to show a *decrease* over time. One possible reason could be a difference in quality of the initial, 2005, courses. The trend for question 5 is not statistically significant however; with 95% confidence,  $-0.33 < p_1 - p_2 < 0.11$  comparing 2005 and 2007. Comparisons for question 4 (perceived benefit) also lack significance, so there is no clear evidence of a difference in quality over time. If there are some effects here, it is possible they reflect the difficulty of remembering events occurring longer ago.

In contrast, there is evidence of a trend in answers to question 5.i. The proportion of respondents expecting to use a method, if they had not already done so, is higher for 2007 respondents than for 2005 (63% versus 29%, with 95% confidence interval  $0.05 < p_1 - p_2 < 0.59$ ). This may indicate, for example, that the longer a participant has not used a method, the less able they are to do so in the future, or that those most able to use a method do so relatively quickly after the event.

Answers to question 5.ii also display a trend. The proportion of respondents who were positive about the potential of NCRM type courses is significantly higher for 2007 respondents than for 2005 ones (92% versus 73% with 95% confidence interval  $0.02 < p_1 - p_2 < 0.36$ ). This could indicate that participants are most enthusiastic about the material and optimistic about their enhanced abilities just after an event.

Our comparisons over time, therefore, may be interpreted as suggesting a message of 'use it or lose it.' That is, answers are consistent with the proposition that the more time has passed after an event, the less likely a participant is to start making use of the material covered and the less positive they are about the forward benefits of the training undertaken.

### 4.1.3 Other results of interest

One question of interest is whether there is a gender differential in attendance of qualitative and quantitative events. Our results are indeed suggestive of such a differential. Overall, women constitute 77% of qualitative event respondents, but only 61% of respondents from quantitative events. This is significant, since with 95% confidence  $0.05 < p_1 - p_2 < 0.27$ , and robust to the exclusion of roadshow data. Without roadshows the percentage of female respondents from qualitative events is 85% and the 95% confidence interval for the difference is  $0.12 < p_1 - p_2 < 0.36$ .

Secondly, data were collected on the preferred time to attend a course which may be useful for marketing purposes (Table 19). The overall distribution of preferred months appears to be rather uniform, however. December appears to be markedly less preferred, and the most commonly-favoured months were June, July and February.

Finally, our survey contains a natural experiment on the effect of different forms of address on response rates. For 350 event attendees, NCRM nodes had sent details of their title (Mr., Miss, Ms., Mrs., Dr. or Professor) whilst for the remaining 585 attendees in the sampling frame, only first and last names were reported. For the former group, we were able to use the rather normal form of greeting “Dear Mr. Cranshaw,” but for the latter we had to use a form of address which is unusual outside of direct marketing: “Dear Jane Francis.” Whilst it is sometimes reported that manipulations of personalisation are not effective (Connor and Waterman 1996; Abhijit and Berger 2005), our response rate appears to halve when we use the unusual form of address. We achieved a response rate of 43% with the first but only 22% with the second forms of address, with a 95% confidence interval of  $0.15 < p_1 - p_2 < 0.27$ . It could be the case that the use of an appropriate form of address is especially important when soliciting responses from academics because of the information about professional status implied by title.

## 4.2 Phase 2 Conclusions

This survey aimed to evaluate the impact of NCRM’s training and capacity-building events by exploring participants’ perceptions of benefit and to check the process by which NCRM courses operate by collecting data relevant to its underlying model. The data we collected suggest that a large majority of participants perceive substantial research-related benefits from attendance. Our data are not informative on the time it takes for participants to put new skills and knowledge into practice but there does appear to be a high rate of usage of methods covered by the events. The main uses to which these are put are research uses, either project proposals or actual research. Cross-sectional comparisons suggest that late-career respondents derive more teaching-related benefits from attendance than early-career ones. It also appears that both qualitative course attendees and late career researchers are relatively more likely to be motivated by general interest in a method than are quantitative course attendees and early career researchers respectively. The sample composition in terms of age and career profile, employment and discipline are consistent with NCRM’s understanding of its role. The importance of the regional dimension to TCB was also confirmed.

## **5. Issues Raised for NCRM's Training and Capacity-Building Strategy**

This report has identified a range of matters that impact on people's decisions to attend NCRM events, the outcomes obtained, 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 may have implications for the Centre regarding its TCB strategy. The key issues are discussed here.

NCRM has a remit to work with and develop capacity in the broad social science community; its focus is primarily academic and Government social researchers but it also aims to engage with researchers in the private, public and voluntary sectors. The survey indicates event participants are primarily academics from a range of disciplines, most commonly sociologists. NCRM also has a remit to work across the career life-course; the survey indicated that the majority of participants of our events are PhD students and junior researchers. Ways to reach out to researchers from different disciplines, sectors and career stages warrant further consideration. One consideration here is the format of events. The qualitative study indicated that 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 from other sectors (Government researchers in particular but also researchers from voluntary sector organisations) indicated that their interests, orientations and resources are very different and that events dominated by academics did not always meet their needs. There may be demand for some events aimed specifically at sectors of the non-academic community, such as policy makers; there may also be demand for discipline-specific or career-stage-specific events. The factors which inhibit specific groups attending NCRM events warrant further investigation. A need for training courses aimed at practitioner researchers (e.g. teachers or health or social care professionals who undertake some research as part of their role) was identified in the qualitative study; whether NCRMs remit extends to this group is an issue for consideration.

The range of outcomes or impacts identified from the qualitative work was more extensive than we anticipated and included issues relating to interaction with course participants and tutors, learning about approaches for use in teaching and supervision and the opportunity for reflection and clarification. The survey indicated that networking with course participants and the contribution to teaching and supervision were not primary benefits of attendance. The relatively low degree of benefit in relation to subsequent teaching and supervision activity is partly explained by the greater representation of 'early career' researchers in the survey sample. However, this may raise an issue for NCRM given that part of its remit is to 'train the trainers' of research methods (that is, tutors of postgraduate research methods courses and research supervisors) in order to ensure that research 'trainers' draw on current research methods in training the researchers of tomorrow. The question for NCRM, consequently, is whether the high proportion of postgraduate attendees represents any lost opportunity for maintaining and updating the skills of those engaged in training and supervision. A strategic issue for ESRC is whether this proportion indicates any deficiency in the research methods training that institutions provide as an obligatory part of their postgraduate degrees.

This evaluation explored views from participants attending a range of different types of events. It is not possible to compare the outcomes associated with different formats of events from this evaluation but some observations from these data about 'non-traditional' events can be made which might usefully be discussed in relation to NCRMs TCB strategy. The qualitative study indicated that 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 format of event is viewed favourably by participants. However, participation in follow-up e-learning activity appears problematic. More research is needed to explore the value of this format and how participation could be encouraged. Placements are another non-traditional capacity building activity 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. Regarding roadshow events, judging by the large numbers attending, they appear to have the potential for establishing an extensive network of researchers for subsequent capacity-building activities.

Both the qualitative study and the survey indicated that the main reasons for deciding to attend an event related to a desire to learn about a method in order to undertake a specific research activity or to expand knowledge about developments in an area. The qualitative study indicated that the opportunity to be taught by an 'expert' appears a secondary, but important, consideration in people's decision to attend an event. 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 develop links for the future. NCRM events run by people perceived as experts in their fields tend to be over-subscribed. Given the popularity of these events, it might be appropriate to consider ways in which opportunities for participation can be increased. NCRM events have tended to be relatively small workshop-style events with up to 20 participants. Larger 'master class' formats might be one way of enabling more people to participate.

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 further. Survey responses may indicate that participants' acquired skills atrophy soon after attendance if the methods covered are not put to use. 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 (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.

## **References**

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## Appendix A: 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 your 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?

## Appendix B – Online questionnaire

The National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) is collecting information about the effectiveness of its training program and related events on research methods. We would like to ask you some questions about an event organised by NCRM that you attended and about your subsequent experience.

Please answer the questions below and on the following pages. Press **Next** when you have finished each page (you cannot return to a page once you have completed it). The survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions concerning the completion of the survey, please email Jonathan Earley [[je1@soton.ac.uk](mailto:je1@soton.ac.uk)]

Our records show that you attended the following event, organised by NCRM:

(button) [course, date location]

Please click ‘next’ to proceed to some questions about this.

1. In which type of organisation were you working (or studying) when you attended the event? Please select the option below which most accurately describes your organisation at that time, by clicking a button.

University / college, Research Institute, Government, Private Sector, Voluntary Sector  
Other (incl. Freelance)

2. What was your job when you attended the event? Please select the option below which most accurately describes your job at that time, by clicking a button.

Post-Graduate Student / Junior Researcher / Senior Researcher / Professor, reader or head of dept.

If these options do not describe your job, please tell us your job title at this time, in the box below.

3. What were your reasons for attending the event? Please choose from the following reasons by clicking in the boxes below (you may choose more than one reason):

To learn methods necessary to conduct a specific research task

To assess the feasibility of using a particular method for a specific research task

To gain methodological resources such as reading lists, other documents and links that I use or plan to use

To learn about developments in a particular area of research methods

If the above options are not sufficient, please tell us any additional reason you had for attending, in the box below.

4. Do you think the course has benefited you subsequently? Please click a button below.  
Yes / No

[If 4 = yes,]

4a You said that you have benefited from attending the event. How much have you benefited how much have you benefited, in the following ways? Please select a response from the drop-down list for each potential benefit listed.

Increased ability to do research

Greatly / Significantly / Moderately / Slightly / Not at all / Not appropriate

Increased knowledge about research methods

Greatly / Significantly / Moderately / Slightly / Not at all / Not appropriate

An opportunity for clarification and reflection

Greatly / Significantly / Moderately / Slightly / Not at all / Not appropriate

Engagement with course tutors / event leaders

Greatly / Significantly / Moderately / Slightly / Not at all / Not appropriate

Networking with course participants

Greatly / Significantly / Moderately / Slightly / Not at all / Not appropriate

As an input to teaching and supervision responsibilities

Greatly / Significantly / Moderately / Slightly / Not at all / Not appropriate

As a source of references and other resources

Greatly / Significantly / Moderately / Slightly / Not at all / Not appropriate

If the above options are not sufficient, please tell us how you benefited, in the box below.

[If 4 = no]

4b You said that you do not think you benefited from attending this event. Why was this? Please choose from the following reasons by clicking in the boxes below (you may choose more than one reason):

no post-course support;

the content was too advanced;

the content was too basic;

the course was of poor quality;

it is too soon after the event;

there has been no opportunity to pursue issues/topics from the course;

If the above options are not sufficient, please tell us why you did not benefit, in the box below.

5. Have you used the methods that were covered, after the event? Please click a button below.

Yes / No

[if 5 = yes]

5a. You said that you have used the methods that were covered. How have you used them? Please choose from the following ways by clicking in the boxes below (you may choose more than one way):

In research intended for publication

In a research proposal

In a research project

In teaching

In supervision of students

If these options are not sufficient, please tell us how you have used them in the box below.

[if 5 = no]

5. You said that you have not used the methods that were covered. Do you expect to use them in the future? Please click a button below.

Yes / No / Don't know

6. Do you think you can significantly improve your ability to do research by taking courses like this one? Please click a button below.

Yes / No / Don't Know

7. Where were you living when you attended this event? (that is, your usual address, not where you stayed in order to attend the event). Please select one location from the drop-down list below.

London

South-East

South-West

Midlands

North-West

North-East

Wales

Scotland

Northern Ireland

8. How important is it to you to have training events put on in your region? Please select an answer from the drop-down list below.

Very important / important / Not important / Don't know

9. When were you born? Please enter the year in YY format in the box below.

10. Are you male or female? Please click a button below.
11. When did you complete your first degree? Please enter the year in YY format in the box below.
12. When did you complete your postgraduate studies? Please enter the year in YY format in the box below or enter n/a if this is not appropriate.
13. According to the ESRC classification of disciplines, with which discipline do you feel the greatest affiliation?  
(from drop-down menu: area studies, demography, economic and social history, economics, education, environmental planning, human geography, linguistics, management and business studies, political science and international studies, psychology, social anthropology, social policy, social work, socio-legal studies, sociology, science and technology studies, statistics, methods and computing)
14. When is the best time during the year for you to attend training events? Please select from the list below (You may select more than one time by holding down Ctrl)

## Appendix C – Roadshow data

Roadshows only took place in 2005. Therefore we show below only the counterpart of section 3.4.1.1. Responses were received from 63 roadshow attendees. Table numbers are left as in the main report for ease of comparison, with the addition of a ‘prime’ symbol; for example, Table 9 of the main report has Table 9’ below as its counterpart.

Inclusion of these results in the main report would bias the comparisons between qualitative and quantitative events. This is because roadshows were only conducted by one node, which focussed on qualitative methods, and their primary purpose is the creation of a network of researchers for subsequent activities rather than the direct enhancement of skills or knowledge. The results for roadshows, indeed, depart significantly from the general pattern, in a direction consistent with this difference in purpose. Reasons for attending the event are, accordingly, less research-oriented (Table 9’) and a smaller percentage of respondents report benefiting from an event, though the majority (73%) still do (Table 10’). Some respondents commented that these events were not training exercises (Table 12’). A majority (60%) reported not using a method after the event, and only 32% of these expected to in future (tables 13’-14’), in contrast to the results in the main text. Fewer respondents reported using the methods in research intended for publication (Table 15’), and fewer were of the opinion that one could improve one’s research capacity by attending these kinds of event (Table 16’). The results excluded from the main text are set out below.

### Roadshows: Results Relevant to Impact

“What were your reasons for attending the event?”

A: To learn methods necessary to conduct a specific research task

B: To assess the feasibility of using a particular method for a specific research task

C: To gain methodological resources such as reading lists, other documents and links that I use or plan to use

D: To learn about developments in a particular area of research methods

Response	%
A	37
B	41
C	40
D	90
N	63

Notes

1. Table shows the percentage of respondents who ticked each response. Because multiple selections were allowed the percentages do not sum to 100.

Table 9’: Reasons for Attending the Event (question 3)

“Do you think the course has benefited you?”

	%
Yes	73
No	27
N	63

Table 10’: Perceived Benefit (question 4)

“How much have you benefited in the following ways?”

A: Increased ability to do research

E: Networking with course participants

B: Increased knowledge about research methods

F: As a source of references / resources

C: Opportunity for clarification and reflection

G: As an input to teaching & supervision

D: Engagement with course tutors / event leaders

% <sup>1,2</sup>	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Greatly	0	0	9	7	11	7	7
Significantly	16	39	42	34	22	33	14
Moderately	36	45	38	18	26	33	14
Slightly	34	11	11	18	15	20	18
Not at all	14	5	0	20	24	4	30
N / A	0	0	0	2	2	2	18

Notes

1. This question was administered only to subjects who said they had benefited.
2. Missing data were dropped before calculating percentages.

Table 11': Manner of Benefit (question 4.i)

“You said that you do not think you benefited from attending this event. Why was this?”

Reason	N <sup>1</sup>
It is too soon after the event	0
no post-course support	3
the content was too advanced	1
the content was too basic	4
the course was of poor quality	7
there has been no opportunity to pursue issues/topics from the course	3
other: <sup>2</sup> it was not a course but more of a publicity event	4
other	1

n=17

Notes

1. This question was only administered to those answering ‘no’ to question 4.
2. This response category was constructed ex-post from the free-response option (“other”).

Table 12': Reasons for not benefiting (question 4.ii)

“Have you made use of the methods that were covered after the event?”

%	
Yes	40
No	60
N	63

Table 13' Use of Methods Covered (question 5)

“If not, do you expect to make use of them in the future?”

% <sup>1</sup>	
Yes	32
No	13
Don't Know	55
N	38

Note

1. This question was only administered to respondents answering 'no' to question 5.

Table 14': Expectations of future use (question 5.i)

“You said that you have used the methods covered by the event. How have you used them?”

A: In research intended for publication

B: In a research proposal

C: In a research project

D: In teaching

E: In supervision of students

Use % <sup>1,2</sup>	
A	22
B	26
C	57
D	17
E	17
N	25

Note

1. This question was administered only to those answering 'yes' to question 5.

2. Because multiple selections were allowed the percentages do not sum to 100.

Table 15': Mode of Use (question 5.ii)

“Do you think you can significantly improve your ability to do research by taking courses like this one?”

%	
Yes	54
No	17
Don't Know	29
N	63

Table 16': Impression of Potential Benefits of NCRM courses (question 6)