



National Centre for Research Methods

# Impact Assessment Report 2020-2025

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# Executive Summary

The National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) is a key provider in training and capacity building (TCB) in (advanced) research methods in the UK (current funding phase Jan 2020-Dec 2025). Over the last five years, NCRM has been assembling rich evidence of its impact, produced through the collection and analysis of quantitative, qualitative, digital and mixed data, using multiple, creative methods. This evidence gathering work is informed by NCRM's [\*Impact Strategy Framework\*](#) - which sets out a theory of change and hypotheses for impact from training and capacity building (TCB) activities - and by its *Impact Action Plan* - which outlines NCRM's plans to evidence its impact.

This *Impact Assessment Report 2025* provides a summary of this evidence. It demonstrates how NCRM has **reached thousands of researchers** from **different sectors, disciplines** and **career stages**; has promoted, and **responded with agility to innovation**; and has built a **strong brand and reputation** as a **central provider** of **high-quality TCB** in social science research methods in the UK, demonstrating **strategic leadership**. This has led to NCRM's TCB activities generating short- and long-term impacts on individuals, organisations, the research community and the research methods ecosystem.

This report presents this comprehensive and robust body of evidence that demonstrates the breadth, depth and quality of the following impacts. In summary:

1. NCRM is a **central provider** of **inclusive, accessible and affordable** training, events and resources on social science research methods in the UK.
2. NCRM is unique in its adaptability and agility in **meeting the range of** different social science **research methods TCB needs** across and beyond the UK.
3. NCRM equips and supports researchers from **across the career life-course** to translate methodological expertise into **real-world benefits**.
4. NCRM is a cohesive force – taking up a **central role and position** within the social sciences research methods landscapes, offering training that crosses and **bridges methodological divides**.
5. NCRM's role and position provides a strong contribution to institutional, interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral **capacity building, innovation** and the **shaping of future research methods and skills** in the UK and beyond, providing also **strategic leadership**.
6. NCRM's provision of high-quality, accessible research methods training is a **benchmark for excellence** and supports the **ESRC and UKRI ambition to build world-class research capability**.

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## 1. Introduction and rationale

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) is a key provider of training and capacity building (TCB) in (advanced) research methods in the UK (current funding phase January 2020 to December 2025). NCRM comprises a partnership between three universities with international reputations in methodological research and training in the social sciences: the University of Southampton (2020-2025), the University of Manchester (2020-2025) and the University of Edinburgh (2020-2024). This core team is complemented by strategically selected institutions from across the UK (between 2020-2024 this consisted of nine partners, [see Appendix 1](#)), which deliver and advise on training, and provide diversity in subject expertise: the Universities of Leeds (Timescapes), Liverpool (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences), Essex (Institute for Social and Economic Research, ISER), Exeter (Q-Step Centre for Computational Science), Bristol (Centre for Multilevel Modelling, CMM), Glasgow (Social and Public Health Sciences Unit), University College London (UCL Social Research Institute), WISERD (Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research) and the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). NCRM is guided by an [Independent Advisory Board](#) of representatives from higher education, industry, and local and central government.

During the current phase of funding (2020-2025) NCRM's remit has been to deliver accessible, high quality (advanced) TCB activities in social science research methods and skills (moving away from previous iterations' focus on training and methodological research in the social sciences). Whilst meeting this remit, NCRM has aimed to be curious, agile, proactive and responsive to the rapidly changing methods landscape and ecosystem (often influenced by technological innovation); pedagogical research in research methods education; the needs of its learners and stakeholders; and the changing strategies and priorities of UKRI and the ESRC. NCRM has underpinned the delivery of TCB with strong engagement, communication and impact strategies, to ensure and evidence that the benefits of this work have reach and significance within and beyond the social sciences and academia.

NCRM's TCB activities have included: short courses; spring and autumn schools; bootcamps webinars; conferences; annual lectures; online resources (videos, podcasts, toolkits); Innovation Fora (collaborative events related to methodological innovation across sectors and career-stages); Methodological Special Interest Groups (MSIGs) and Communities of Practice; and various networks, e.g., to provide coordination and support for ESRC investments (such as the Doctoral Training Partnership Training Network (DTP-TN) and the Data Resources Training Network (DR-TN)). NCRM also provides specific TCB activities that focus on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and on challenging ethical norms (for example, through TCB activities on The Decolonial Researcher, Radical Ethics, and Participatory Action Research, and Responsible AI).

Enabling access to NCRM's TCB activities and events has been high on NCRM's agenda. The *NCRM 2020 Training Needs Analysis*, produced shortly before the pandemic, noted an outstanding need for the UK methods training community to be able to deliver high-quality online teaching (to enable access for learners who were unable to attend face-to-face activities). Early in the Covid-19 pandemic, NCRM drew on its pedagogical expertise and on at-pace technological innovation to begin running (and evaluating delivery of) high-quality online training and capacity building activities. It also delivered the Changing Research Practices for Covid-19 Project, providing insights on the management of methodological contingencies for researchers whose research was disrupted by the responses to and uncertainty of the pandemic. Since 2020, NCRM has delivered a large proportion of its TCB activities online, opening-up access to wider audiences. NCRM also has a low-fee model and a bursary system (for those who cannot afford to attend training and events) to enable cross-sectoral access to its TCB activities.

NCRM has a wide range of audiences and stakeholders with whom it interacts and engages, and to whom it delivers high quality TCB, covering different research methods areas, and addressing vital research methods needs and skills, to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of research methods skills development. This report looks at the impact of this work.

NCRM's [Impact Strategy Framework](#) conceptualises impact from training and capacity building (TCB) activities building on a theory of change. Impact from NCRM TCB is defined as the '*strong positive effect that [NCRM's] activities and resources have on our beneficiaries*', which includes positive effects on: (i) the knowledge and skills development of academics and non-academics, (ii) the work of beneficiaries from the application of these skills, and (iii) the wider methodological landscape across and beyond the social sciences and across sectors. (For the full impact definition, see p. 2 of the *Impact Strategy Framework*.) The *Impact Strategy Framework* outlines the range of impacts that NCRM hypothesises can be achieved from its TCB activities, the work undertaken by its workstreams, and its engagement and collaboration with other UKRI investments (see [Section 2](#) for the list of impact types and hypotheses). To assess whether NCRM is achieving impact, and if so what types, NCRM has been collecting and analysing evidence of impacts since 2020. The generation and evidencing of impact are embedded in all the work that NCRM undertakes, and strongly interconnected with NCRM's engagement and TCB programme strategies.

This impact assessment report follows a series of similar reports produced during previous NCRM funding phases and builds on the midterm impact assessment work carried out in 2022. The report presents a comprehensive and robust body of evidence of the range of impacts generated by NCRM's activities (2020 - 2024), and demonstrates how these impacts interconnect, build on each other and contribute to NCRM's reputation in methodological capacity building within, and beyond, the social sciences, and across different sectors and disciplines. This evidence enables NCRM to highlight the

key role that it has been playing, firstly as a central training hub and focus for cross- and inter-disciplinary methods communities, and secondly, as a lynchpin for the methodological training, learning and knowledge-exchange ecosystem in the UK (with substantial international reach). Our aim in presenting this evidence, is to amplify, and widen understanding of the positive effects that NCRM has had on this ecosystem, enabling it to broaden, grow, and evolve over time (both during this latest phase of funding 2020-2025, and over the last [twenty years](#) since NCRM's foundation in 2004).

## 2. Impact hypotheses

The NCRM *Impact Strategy Framework* outlines the impact types to be achieved via NCRM TCB activities in its impact hypotheses. These are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Impact hypotheses**

Hypothesis number:	Impact Hypotheses	Achieved /evidenced by 2024
1	Participants' engagement with NCRM training and resources will result in a change in their knowledge and skills, thus advancing their methodological literacy and practice.	Yes ( <a href="#">Section 4.2</a> )
2	Participants who have engaged with NCRM training and resources will apply their new learning and skills to their research and/or teaching.	Yes ( <a href="#">Section 4.2</a> )
3	Some participants who engage with NCRM training and resources will develop networks and collaborations during and after taking part.	Yes ( <a href="#">Sections 4.3 &amp; 4.4</a> )
4	NCRM will enable the development of new, imaginative and innovative methods, and the sharing of knowledge and best practice in these methods, within (and beyond) the social sciences.	Yes (particularly evident in Innovation Fora, development of tool kits and innovative adaptation of methods) (See <a href="#">Sections 4.4 &amp; 4.6</a> )
5	NCRM knowledge exchange events will enable the development of networks and communities of practice.	Yes (See <a href="#">Sections 4.3 &amp; 4.4</a> )
6	Some NCRM beneficiaries will engage in multiplier capacity building (sharing of knowledge amongst peers, colleagues and others).	Yes (some have also led to development of networks and communities of practice) (See <a href="#">Sections 4.3 &amp; 4.4</a> )
7	Some NCRM beneficiaries may go on to gain or change their jobs, or their job roles.	Yes (doctoral researchers, Early Career Researchers, and some established career researchers; some in a non-linear way)

		(See <a href="#">Section 4.5</a> )
8	Some NCRM beneficiaries will apply their new or improved skills in research that goes on to provide economic, societal, policy and cultural benefits	Yes (beneficiaries have demonstrated evidence of this) (See <a href="#">Section 4.6</a> )
9	Some of those who have undertaken NCRM research on methods, and then applied these methods to research, will go on to provide economic, societal, policy and cultural benefits	NCRM has continuing evidence of longer-term impacts from previous NCRM phases, culminating in knowledge exchange and TCB activities (see NCRM 20 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary Impact Prize <a href="#">results</a> ). (See <a href="#">Sections 4.6 &amp; 4.7</a> )
10	The interconnectedness of NCRM's workstreams will make NCRM more than the sum of its parts as an infrastructure organisation	Yes (demonstrated through testimonial interviews) (See <a href="#">Sections 4.3, 4.4 &amp; 4.7</a> )
11	NCRM will continue to develop into more than the sum of its parts enabling it to benefit the methods landscape	Yes (demonstrated through testimonial interviews) (See <a href="#">Sections 4.7 &amp; 5</a> )

### 3. Synopsis of data collected on impact

NCRM has collected and analysed a **wide range of evidence of its impact through the use of multiple (creative) methods**, using quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method approaches. An overview of these methods and data are outlined in Table 2. Appendices provide more details of the data available, and the methods used in gathering and analysing these data.

**Table 2: Overview of data collected on NCRM's impact**

Data collection methods used to evidence NCRM's Impact	Time period	Data used for this report
<b>Uptake and reach of NCRM's TCB provision</b>	January 2020 - November 2024	Separate reports on KPIs provided to the ESRC.  Annex 4 of <i>NCRM Midterm Review 2022</i> .  Further information on the data collected is available on <a href="#">request</a>



<b>Course and event registration data</b> (anonymised)	Data generated from April 2020 onwards. 'Anticipated impact' question added in March 2023. Analysis of registration data took place in July 2024.	Report on analyses of uptake, reach and intended use of training, from data collected between 2020 and May 2024.  Further information on the data collected is available on <a href="#">request</a>
<b>Course and event evaluation questionnaires</b> (anonymised)	Data generated from April 2020. Analysis of all evaluation questionnaires took place in July 2024.	Report on analyses of evaluation questionnaires (for the period April 2020 and May 2024).  Further information on the data collected is available on <a href="#">request</a>
<b>Two user impact surveys</b> Following up course participants and participants of RMeF	February 2022, analysed in March 2022. December 2023/January 2024 - analysed in January 2024.	Results of analysis of 2023/24 survey.  Annex 8 of <i>NCRM Midterm Review 2022</i> for results of 2022 survey.  Further information on the data collected is available on <a href="#">request</a>
<b>Impact case studies</b> 70 impact case-studies	14 collected in spring 2022 for <i>NCRM Midterm Review 2022</i>  47 collected in September 2023.  9 collected in June 2024.	Results of analyses of 2023 NCRM Impact Prize submissions, and NCRM 20 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary Impact Prize 2024.  Annex 8 of <i>NCRM Midterm Review 2022</i> . (Some published on the <a href="#">NCRM website</a> )  Further information on the data collected is available on <a href="#">request</a>
<b>Written impact reports produced by:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• trainers and organisers of events</li> <li>• organisers of NCRM's Innovation Fora</li> <li>• NCRM training bursary holders</li> </ul>	September 2023.	Analysis of Innovation Fora submissions to the 2023 NCRM Impact Prize  Further information on the Innovation Fora is available on <a href="#">request</a>
<b>Extracts of online feedback/posts on NCRM events, courses and resources</b>	January 2020-April 2024.	Examples used in the body of this report.  Further information on the data collected is available on <a href="#">request</a>

<b>Data on NCRM website usage</b>	January 2020-April 2024.	Various analyses submitted to the ESRC. Examples used in the body of this report.  Further information on the data collected is available on <a href="#">request</a>
<b>Testimonial interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders.</b> 21 semi-structured interviews with 25 NCRM stakeholders in relation to impact (NCRM Centre Partners, NCRM networks and MSIGs, ESRC investments, DR-TN, DTP-TN, ADR-UK, members of the independent advisory board.)	Data collection May 2024-October 2024.	Quotes from transcripts of interviews.  Interview schedules are available on <a href="#">request</a> , however transcripts cannot be shared.
<b>Short impact videos produced with stakeholders.</b> With stakeholders from different career life stages who have played central roles in delivering and enabling NCRM impact (during this and previous phases)	Autumn 2024.	Ongoing and will be posted onto NCRM's website during 2025.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 NCRM's uptake and reach

The impacts that NCRM has hypothesised that it will generate are dependent upon NCRM achieving strong uptake and reach of its TCB activities. Therefore, it is important to note the **sustained high demand and uptake of NCRM** courses, events and online resources. For example, between January 2020 and November 2024, **NCRM trained more than 6,500 course participants** (n=6569) with the majority of NCRM's courses being fully booked and some requiring a waiting list. Other markers of high uptake and reach during this period include:

- More than 1 million unique website users, and more than 2 million (inter/national) views of our online resources and videos alone,
- **More than 7,500 event participants,**
- Very popular Innovation Fora (The Innovation Fora on Decolonial Research Methods, for example, had 2,400 participants, (4,600 registrations)),
- A fully booked 2023 Research Methods e-Festival ((RMeF) 1,500 registrations with waiting list; 827 registrations for the 2021 RMeF),
- A fully booked 2024 in-person MethodsCon event with 204 attendees; in-person MethodsCon event in 2022 with 171 attendees,

- 150 places across five (fully booked) spring and autumn schools (each offering 30 places).

NCRM is also reaching participants **from across a range of disciplines**, with 20% (n=1158) of course registrations coming **from beyond the social sciences** (January 2020 - May 2024); of these, half (n=579) came from medical sciences. Further, while attendance by non-academics can vary depending on the type of event offered, with some attracting a high proportion of non-academics, on average, 14% of course attendees (n=790) were from **outside academia** and there was growing engagement from people in government, public, and voluntary and community sectors. Some provision includes bespoke training, for example, for the Ministry of Justice, the Home Office, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the UK Health Security Agency, the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory, Innovate, and UCAS.

To achieve these levels of uptake and reach, an important aspect of NCRM's training (alongside ensuring quality and breadth of topics) has been its **low-fee** and (mostly) **online delivery model**, which enable **inclusive access** to research methods training and events. Frequently, non-academic user-groups and advisory board members have provided feedback that NCRM **training bursaries and NCRM's low fee structure** are (very) attractive and **enable access to training that otherwise some participants would not be able to attend**. NCRM has also been able to offer access to expensive innovative training and events with experts from the private sector (normally with a prohibitive price point).

*“We managed to get Ray Adams Farr to deliver the [‘Open-Source Investigations’](#) which .... is also significant because it's the lowest cost introduction to open-source investigations in the whole of the UK. And not everybody can afford to access the training offered by the Guardian, Bellingcat and all of these other major [media] entities. So, I think that's part of the remit to provide training and affordable costs in ways which are accessible to a wide community.”*  
(Professor Michael Mair, NCRM Senior Fellow, University of Liverpool).

The **low fee model and bursary system** operated by NCRM has also enabled **access to methods training for students from smaller universities** – training that their universities could not otherwise afford to provide for very small cohorts of doctoral researchers.

*“...[F]or someone like me from one of the larger Russell Group universities..., I'm not too interested in NCRM offering something like NVivo training, but I'm aware that if you are at ...[a] post-92 institution where you've literally got a handful of people, that would be really valuable to them.”* (Anonymised Testimonial interview with a member of the DTP-TN)

To appropriately meet the needs of doctoral students, including those from smaller and larger universities, but without replicating efforts already in place, NCRM's activities are guided by its training needs assessments and close work with ESRC Training Networks.

*“The crucial thing is to facilitate the provision of training ... They [NCRM] can get the best person nationally, or indeed ... internationally, to make those opportunities available. That just really wouldn't work on a single institution or even really a single DTP basis. So, I think it [NCRM] has a really, really valuable role.”* (Anonymised Testimonial interview with member of the DTP-TN)

NCRM also offers access to **affordable niche training**. A phenomenon of running quite niche courses/events is that the number of participants attending can be low *“The more specialized you get, the fewer people turn up”* (Testimonial interview with Professor George Leckie, CMM, University of Bristol). ‘Per head’ this training is costly to the provider, and in a competitive training-provision environment this type of niche training would not be available, or would be too costly for some participants, such as doctoral students, to attend. Yet, **bringing together even small groups of researchers who want to learn and use niche methods** can represent **an investment in world-class research futures**, building capacity and innovation within the UK's research community.

In summary, data on NCRM uptake and reach indicates consistent, very high demand for NCRM TCB provision from across the (inter/national academic and non-academic) research community. Its inclusive delivery of accessible training also broadens access to a wide range of high quality TCB activities, building capacity for the development of world-class UK research.

#### 4.2 Quality of NCRM provision and impact on learning (Hypotheses 1, 2 and 4)

Setting the impacts of the NCRM into a contemporary context, the UK's current vision for its continued generation and delivery of world class social research (via the ESRC's *Strategic Delivery Plan 2022-2025* and *UKRI Strategy 2022-2027*) is dependent, in part, on the continued provision of high-quality research methods training and capacity building (TCB) in the UK.

*“Empirical researchers need a solid foundation in methods - they need that to be truly world-class.”* (Testimonial interview with Professor Fiona Steele, LSE, and chair of NCRM Independent Advisory Board)

To help NCRM deliver high-quality TCB activities, anonymised **course evaluation questionnaires** are used to monitor all NCRM courses and events. Questionnaire responses are checked to ensure that participants are satisfied with the quality of the course/event that they have attended. For the period April 2020 to May 2024, 1,771 of course participants (31%) completed evaluation

questionnaires, and analysis of these indicates that **respondents' satisfaction with training was high: 92% of participants indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the training they attended.**

From 13 October 2023, a partial modification was made to the original April 2020 evaluation questionnaire. The questionnaire was shortened, and two new questions were added to help NCRM better gauge the extent to which its courses had yielded immediate short-term transformations in participants' knowledge, skills, and in their confidence in applying this knowledge and these skills (hypotheses 1 and 2 in NCRM's *Impact Strategy Framework*). NCRM course participants are now asked to rate how much they agree with the statements: *'The event has improved my knowledge and skills'* and *'I feel confident about applying my learning to my work and research'*. Analysis of responses to these questions (n=387, between 13 October 2023 and the end of May 2024) found that **92% (n=368) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the event had improved their knowledge and 87% (n=336) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident about applying their learning to their work and research.**

Course participants completing the evaluation questionnaires were also encouraged to provide additional feedback on how a course had met their needs. Of those that used the open text option, many reported that their courses had **significantly increased their knowledge and understanding of the topics covered**, for example in fuel poverty measurement, impact evaluation methods, and research on complex interventions. The majority also highlighted the strong relevance and applicability of the course content to directly support their current work, research projects, and/or future plans. Participants referred to the way in which courses had provided them with valuable frameworks, tools, and resources that they could immediately put into practice. For example, one participant wrote:

*'This training helped me understand the nuances behind a complex intervention, and how important it is to understand its programme theory, the context where it is being applied, and adapting the flexible attitude in terms of its continuous development. This is very helpful for me as I plan to concentrate on mental health, PTSD, and posttraumatic growth.'* (Anonymous written response to evaluation questionnaire section on 'How this course supported your training needs'.)

In these open text responses, the strong relevance of NCRM's courses for participants' current and/or future work was linked to their **increased confidence and competence**. Many participants reported feeling better equipped and prepared to undertake the types of research, analysis, and evaluation covered in the courses.

These findings are supported by NCRM's most recent 2023/24 **User Follow-up Survey** which provides further evidence of the quality and impact of NCRM's TCB activities. Analysis of survey responses found that **94%** (n=266 out of 282) of those who completed the survey **had applied their learning to their work or research** (n=17 out of 282, 6%, indicated they had not yet used the methods. **42%** (n=120 out of 282) of respondents indicated that they **applied their learning to their thesis, about a third had used the methods in informing policy and practice, 20% had used it in supervision and mentoring, and 18% in teaching**. As with the evaluation questionnaires, the 2023/2024 User Follow-up Survey also includes open-ended questions, one of which asks respondents to provide examples of impact/benefit relating to a respondent's involvement with NCRM. The responses to this question provide further information on how **respondents have applied their learning to their work**. They reveal **excellent examples of NCRM courses facilitating important real-world changes in policy and/or areas of professional practice, both inside and outside of the Social Sciences, and across different sectors**. (Not only do these examples provide direct evidence of NCRM impact, but they also highlight the continued importance of the impact case study approach to evidencing the quality and impact of its TCB activities).

NCRM has also collected a wealth of **written online feedback** from users of NCRM's resources, courses and events relating to the quality of these activities and resources and their impact on individual learning:

*'For anyone starting in social research, this new tool from @NCRMUK is gold dust. It has a simple way to identify the types of methods that may be suitable based on why you are doing research. Awesome!'* (Resource: [How to choose a research method](#))

*'This is by far the best ever binary logistic regression explanation I've ever come across. Thank you so much.'* (Resource: [Binary logistic regression](#))

**NCRM's highly popular biennial Research Methods e-Festival (RMeF) has a strong reputation and brand**. It continues to receive very positive online feedback from participants who see it as a high-quality research methods event: *'Thank you for putting on a fabulous event that was so informative and thought provoking'*.

A recent **ECR blog published by the British Educational Research Association** ([Presenting at an e-festival: Experiences of an early career researcher | BERA](#)) about a doctoral researcher's **experience of presenting at the RMeF**, illustrates the quality of support available for presenters that enables them to deliver high-quality presentations. It also illustrates the capacity for the 2023 RMeF to generate impact (hypothesis 3):



*‘I also made use of the other features on the platform including sharing articles and recommending conferences. As a speaker, I had the ability to set a poll for my event, which gave me an indication of the levels of pre-existing knowledge of my audience members. Collectively, these features were a real strength of the e-festival format as they allowed me to create a researcher profile, network with like-minded researchers and fine-tune my presentation – all before the event!’* (Lucy Robinson, University of Oxford).

Feedback given **in testimonial interviews** with various external NCRM stakeholders expand upon this **narrative of the quality of NCRM’s TCB activities**, showing how NCRM is perceived by its users as being a provider of high-quality courses, TCB provision, and a one-stop shop for high-quality resources. One interviewee, a member of NCRM’s Pedagogy Network, had recently taught a course on the principles and practices of quantitative data analysis, and signposted students to a variety of NCRM resources that they could use after the course.

*“So, in an era where we have flooded by resources online. One of the real struggles is to find the good quality ones. Yes, and the NCRM is already doing that partly for me because it’s already only putting up things that are of good quality.”* (Anonymised Testimonial Interview with a member of the Pedagogy Network)

Another external NCRM stakeholder also commented on **NCRM’s reputation for the high quality of its TCB activities**.

*“NCRM conveys quality; it has a kind of kite mark associated with it and its activities. In today’s context, where the integrity of research is so important, we need trusted sources and resources, and NCRM provides these...”* (Testimonial Interview with Professor Elizabeth Stokoe, NCRM Independent Advisory Board)

Last, but not least, many of the applicants for the **2023 NCRM Impact Prize** provided **case-study examples of the impact of high-quality NCRM courses on their knowledge and skills in research methods**, enabling them to become confident in their use. Submissions described how applicants’ learning and confidence had been reinforced through post-course clinics, and support and troubleshooting offered by tutors, adding value to NCRM’s course provision. Some of those submitting applications for the 2023 Impact Prize noted that NCRM had enabled them to **identify innovative methods that were a good fit to research ideas, and/or enabled them to identify new innovative areas of research, using newly learnt methodological skills and knowledge**.

## Relationship between ethics and quality of research methods and skills TCB provision

NCRM ensures that **ethical research principles, practices and standards** underpin, and are embedded, in its research methods and skills TCB activities. Consideration of ethical principles, practices and standards in research methods TCB is likely to become of increasing importance given the shift in focus of (potential) future reporting requirements for UK research through initiatives such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF, 2029). These promise an expectation that high-quality research should demonstrate (ethical and methodological) rigour, be open and accessible to all, support the values of equity, inclusion and diversity, and have strong engagement and impact (see for example, [Reed](#), 2023, and [Manners and Duncan](#), 2024).

NCRM's Centre Partners have provided evidence, in testimonial interviews, of the importance they place on including material on ethical research principles, practices and standards when delivering TCB activities. Some have ensured that their TCB activities have a specific focus on the ethical issues that relate to a particular research method, for example, an NCRM event on the ethics of social media.

*"I invited our ethics review people to it, and our data governance people to it. The course was on the ethics of social media research, run by a guy who is a computer scientist. He was able to speak very well to a social science audience... The two times that he delivered the sessions, it was fantastic, super; a really good discussion. And it was interesting because there were other ethics experts in the audience, who were signed up for the course, which generated a very interesting discussion."* (Testimonial interview with Professor Susan Banducci, Centre for Computational Science, University of Exeter)

Dr Emily Long, NCRM Senior Fellow at the Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, at the University of Glasgow, described running courses that promote inclusivity in data analysis, for example, the over-subscribed short course on ['Queering Data'](#) to help participants design survey questions in an inclusive, transparent and reflexive manner. Other NCRM stakeholders noted the provision of TCB activities and resources that focus entirely on ethics, for example, [Radical Research Ethics](#), [Participatory Action Research: Equitable Partnerships and Engaged Research](#); and [Ethics in Research Involving Children](#).

The **impact of NCRM's focus on ethics** in its TCB activities was evidenced in high-quality submissions to the NCRM 2023 Impact prize. We found that **43% of applicants specifically referred to the process of reflecting on, and applying, ethical principles, practices and standards in research methods and skills to their research**, and had addressed equity, diversity and inclusion across the lifespan of their research from design to outputs, dissemination and impacts.



#### 4.3 Development of networks, collaborations and communities of practice (Hypotheses 3, 4 and 5) – strategic leadership

Key TCB outputs of NCRM are its initiation and establishment of networks, communities of practice and collaborations, hence contributing to strategic leadership. These include:

1. *Functional (or strategic) TCB networks*: bringing together key ESRC/ UKRI investments and/or other institutions and TCB providers for the purpose of designing and implementing TCB strategies, for example, to discuss key issues around methods training, identification of training needs and development of strategies for meeting these needs. Examples include the DR-TN, the DTP-TN, and the new Survey Methods Training Network (SM-TN).
2. *Methodological networks*: bringing together leading researchers from a broad methods field, including for strategic purposes. Examples include: the NCRM Pedagogy network, with leading experts in pedagogy research and methods teaching; the Survey Data Collection Network, comprising leading survey methodologists from across sectors, including survey practitioners.
3. *Methodological Special Interest Groups (MSIGs)*: communities of practice around a particular methodological topic, including individual researchers from across sectors, disciplines and career stages. Examples include: MSIGs on Participatory Action Methods (PAR), Health Research, Live Video Interviewing (in collaboration with the European Social Survey), Creative Writing for Social Research, Retrospective Qualitative Research (in collaboration with ONS), Administrative Data (mostly PhD students; in collaboration with ADR-UK).
4. *Research collaborations*: research collaborations between researchers, which emerge from NCRM events (often initiated by researchers inspired by NCRM training, rather than formally set up by NCRM.)

An important impact arising from NCRM courses, events, and activities (including Innovation Fora) has been the subsequent setting up of **networks, communities of practice, Methodological Special Interest Groups (MSIGs), and new research collaborations**. These provide a foundation and stepping-stone for NCRM participants to achieve further, sustained, **long-term impacts**, which contribute to NCRM's aim to be 'more than a sum of its parts' (hypotheses 10 and 11, see Section 4.7). Interviews with stakeholders, and written case-studies, provide evidence on how these types of collaborations have gone on **to enable: learning, applications of knowledge and skills, knowledge exchange, peer-support, collaborative and interdisciplinary working, career/professional development, reflective thinking about ethics, and opportunities to publish** (see also Section 4.4).

**Case study** submissions for **NCRM's Midterm Review (2022)**, the **NCRM 2023 Impact Prize** and the **NCRM 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Impact Prize 2024** all **provide evidence on how NCRM courses, events, and activities have led to collaborative research projects, collaborative funding**

**applications, and networks for developing skills, thinking, and peer support.** Case studies submitted by Dr Phil Brooker (Senior Lecturer, University of Liverpool) and Dr Mark Carrigan (Senior Lecturer, University of Manchester; in 2022 and in 2023) provide strong examples of this type of impact. Following on from delivering an ‘Introduction to Python course’ for NCRM, Brooker and Carrigan began embedding collaborative-working into peer-driven coding courses, culminating in: *‘post-workshop coordination forums where users who had developed a genuine working relationship over weeks were able to continue to code together’*, which led to several research collaborations between participants.

Applicants to the 2023 NCRM Impact Prize described **being inspired to set up networks, or special interest groups, after attending NCRM courses.** For example, Lauren Powell, doctoral researcher at the University of Hull, described setting up a writing group for doctoral students from across six different universities during the pandemic, after attending Helen Kara’s course on ‘Creative and Productive Thesis Writing for Social Research’. The group write together, but also share knowledge, skills and run ‘practice vivas’, helping doctoral students through the final stages of the PhD process.

In 2023, NCRM ran a Southampton-based call for applications to deliver NCRM TCB activities. Successful applicants have subsequently reported on the initial impacts arising from these activities. Reports include descriptions of several initiatives and projects that are in the process of building communities of practice. For example, funding for a conference of medical statisticians who wanted to teach themselves machine learning, has led to the building of an open access synthetic database for this purpose, which is likely to have longer-term future impacts for this community of statisticians. A series of multi-stakeholder workshops on Image Based Analysis, which was led by Dr Ashton Kingdon (Lecturer, University of Southampton), included attendees from Tech against Terrorism and the Metropolitan Police. These workshops have led to cross-sectoral collaborative projects and knowledge exchange, international learning on risk, and the production of a Good Practice Guide.

**NCRM’s high-quality [Innovation Fora](#) (mostly organized by NCRM’s Engagement Team) have been particularly impactful when it comes to bringing together networks and collaborations of researchers, across sectors and disciplines (Hypothesis 4) through Knowledge Exchange events.** The review panel (an independent panel consisting of leading research methods/impact experts) for the NCRM 2023 Impact Prize observed:

*“It’s very clear... the Innovation Fora are having such an impact on participants that [they’re] really adding value to what’s being done”.* (NCRM 2023 Impact Prize Panel member).

The quality of these Innovation Fora is also evidenced through the selection of three out of five Innovation Fora applications as finalists for the NCRM 2023 Impact Prize (see Section 4.4 for further information).

While many **communities of practice** have emerged directly from TCB activities and events, and others - such as NCRM's Pedagogy Network, and NCRM's Survey Data Collection Network - have been purpose-built by NCRM, some of NCRM's MSIGs and networks have been the product of NCRM's engagement activities. This includes engagement work with the DTP-TN (which was set up March 2021 following on from NCRM's Engagement Tour in January 2021), the DR-TN, and work with other ESRC investments. For example, the recent creation of an administrative data MSIG for the ADR-UK PhD cohort:

*“And so then, when we set up our PhD cohort, which we have within ADR-UK, Ali Hanbury contacted me and said, “Oh, what about an MSIG for your PhDs?” and that was useful to... understand a bit more about what that was and how it could work for us. ... So, I think mostly in terms of the network, it's just useful being plugged in ... across a number of different organisations and investments”. (Testimonial interview with Emily Oliver, Head of Research and Capacity Building, ADR-UK)*

Another example is NCRM's highly active Participatory Action Research (PAR) MSIG, which is a product of NCRM's engagement work with the University of Cambridge-led DTP (now CAM-DTP). Recognizing a UK-wide need, NCRM's Engagement Manager, Dr Ali Hanbury (University of Manchester), worked with ESRC funded doctoral researchers to develop this MSIG. Established in December 2022, the PAR MSIG has members from across different sectors and different career stages, and has run a range of different events, such as its popular 'Critical Conversations' which create spaces for dialogue on PAR methods, meeting needs identified by its members.

One of NCRM's more recently set-up MSIGs, the NCRM Health MSIG established in January 2024, is a product of work between NCRM academic staff (Dr Hanbury and Professor Dianna Smith) with Early Career Researchers (ECRs) working in health research. In written feedback, two of the founding members of this MSIG have described how its webinars are providing a space for health researchers to grapple with a range of challenges relating to health research.

*‘The webinars held thus far have allowed participants to engage in critical discussions about ethical and methodological challenges in health research, especially in fields like AI and participatory methods. These events have created a space where experts from diverse disciplines exchange insights to foster a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in health research.’ (Written feedback from Dr Ulla Petti, University of Cambridge, and Dr Ayomide Oluseye, the Open University).*

NCRM communities of practice Methodological Special interest Groups (MSIGs) and networks are seen as vital to the (cross-sectoral) research communities that use them. This includes **formal networks**, like the DTP-TN and DR-TN, which are led by NCRM.

Section 4.4 outlines some of the ways in which NCRM makes a difference through the innovation, knowledge sharing and knowledge exchange impacts that have emerged out of NCRM's MSIGs, networks and communities of practice.

#### 4.4 Innovation, knowledge sharing and knowledge exchange (Hypotheses 4, 5 and 6)

NCRM's **Innovation Fora** have resulted in highly impactful knowledge exchange events and activities relating to **innovative research methods**. For example, Professor Jane Hirst (Nuffield Dept of Reproductive Health, University of Oxford) used knowledge exchange events on machine learning and gestational diabetes to develop **cross-sectoral collaborations** that promise strong **societal impacts** for women's health in the future. Knowledge exchange work by Dr Leon Moosavi (Senior Lecturer, University of Liverpool) on Decolonising Methods has had **international reach**, with webinars and digital resources still being accessed by thousands of academics and non-academics.

**Knowledge exchange** is a core value at the heart of NCRM's various **MSIGs and methodological networks**. The Pedagogy Network (and its offshoot 'TeaTime for Trainers') is a well-established network run by Professor Melanie Nind. When interviewed, members of the network emphasised its value and importance for **learning about methodological change**, and for **developing and innovating pedagogical literacy and practice**. These benefits extend beyond the network, to make a difference to members' institutional communities:

*"I think everybody can tend to think that methods are something you're going to handle within your study, within your research group. But there are these bigger changes which deserve more communal dialogue and reflection. And the network is the kind of space for prompting thinking about that I can and do cascade down to the departmental level."* (Anonymised Testimonial interview with a member of the Pedagogy Network)

**Dialogue represents a transformative tool** that is utilized by NCRM's MSIGs and networks, and which can generate impacts that go beyond knowledge exchange to knowledge creation, development and innovation. Interviews with different MSIG members, revealed **a strong sense of trust within certain groups, creating opportunities and safe spaces to discuss difficulties, problems, and gaps in knowledge, which can lead to new ways of considering methods**. A member of the Pedagogy Network described the value and importance of having a safe space for this type of dialogue in the network.

*"And if you're going to build that pedagogical culture, you have to get people together in spaces where dialogue can take place. And you can have some of that back and forth about what we do and how we do it. And being alert to horizons, near horizons, horizon scanning, and thinking*

*about some of the key issues, and having a safe place to discuss difficulty is really important.”*

(Anonymised Testimonial interview with a member of the Pedagogy Network)

This observation on the dialogic strengths of this network was also echoed by members of the PAR MSIG.

While MSIGs and Networks play a strong role in the **sharing and cascading of knowledge** within and beyond the institutions of their members, **NCRM’s short courses** have also enabled participants to **cascade their new or improved knowledge within their institutions**. For example, at the University of Exeter), knowledge sharing has taken place, across the career life stage, among staff members at the University of Exeter and beyond, enabling staff members to make and develop different types of methodological and collaborative connections.

*“We have a lot of people who are doing the training in computational methods who are staff - and not just early career staff, but mature staff who are doing this, and realising they want to do it for themselves rather than rely on postdocs. So, it’s about upskilling, or changing, skills and skill-sets for the midcareer researcher. The training has also been good at connecting PhD researchers with supervisors, potential supervisors, or potential PhD researchers with potential supervisors. It’s been good at developing collaborations amongst staff at the university. So, you go to the course, and you meet people from different parts of the university working on the same thing, or different people from other universities working on the same things.”* (Professor Susan Banducci, Centre for Computational Science, University of Exeter)

Submissions to the **NCRM 2023 Impact Prize** and the **NCRM 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Impact Prize 2024** have provided evidence of impactful knowledge exchange, knowledge sharing and capacity building. For example, Dr Richard Brock (lecturer at King’s College, London) used his learning on quantitative methods to change the teaching and learning culture in his department at the Centre for Research in Education in STEM. Anita Chandra (Senior Evaluation and Performance Analyst, Mind) shared her new knowledge on survey design with colleagues, and improved data collection techniques used to evaluate service delivery, promising benefits to Mind’s clients in the future. One of the winners of the NCRM 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Impact Prize 2024, described sharing her learning from NCRM training with her doctoral researcher peers.

*‘Another significant impact of NCRM training is the sharing of reading resources, and a practice dataset with postgraduate (PGR) students which has assisted them in their data analysis. This builds their capacity and promotes the transfer of knowledge to apply learning in real-life practices, resulting in the creation of a knowledge society. Further the NCRM course also motivated me to successfully secure a small grant to facilitate training of other PGR students in involving the public in research and showcasing how I integrated the technical aspect of the*



*research with OAs [ethnically diverse older adults]*'. (Naureen Meghani, doctoral researcher at the University of Swansea, submission for the NCRM 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Impact Prize 2024).

Evidence of cascaded impacts from training were also captured in **open text comments** in NCRM's **User Follow-Up surveys**. Data on recent knowledge exchange activities was gathered by the 2023/24 survey: 20% (n=57) of respondents had used the methods they had learnt through NCRM in supervision of students or staff mentoring, and 18% (n=51) had used their new knowledge and skills in teaching.

Knowledge-sharing and exchange from NCRM courses and activities are not just products of this phase of NCRM funding. There is evidence of **longer-term impacts** from other phases of ESRC investment in NCRM. This was evidenced in a discussion at a meeting of NCRM's Advisory Board in 2022, where Dr Patten Smith noted the influence that NCRM has had on capacity building in his organization (Ipsos), over many years:

*"NCRM has had positive impact in its life and in my career - quite significant positive impact... I'm talking about specific courses I've been on. Often maybe 10 years ago by some of the great practitioners who are out there. And this has subtly improved all the work I do. And then is transmitted to all the people - because I'm fairly influential in the organization - so to the whole of the way that the organization does it... so absolutely enormous and it filters through, but it's almost impossible to measure."* (Dr Patten Smith, Independent Advisory Board (IAB) member, recorded discussion on impact, IAB meeting Spring 2022)

Longer-term impacts of **knowledge development, knowledge sharing, and knowledge exchange** represent strong NCRM legacies that continue to contribute to the development of the inter/national methods landscape and ecosystem. An example of this type of **legacy building** can be seen in a winning submission to the NCRM 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Impact Prize 2024 from Dr Susie Weller, Dr Emma Davidson, Professor Rosalind Edwards and Professor Lynn Jamieson. Through their sustained engagement in NCRM (through research, teaching, providing resources, and presenting at NCRM Research Methods Festivals) this mixed-career stage group of researchers has:

*'... pioneered a new breadth-and-depth method for analysing large volumes of qualitative data that works across methodological boundaries, combining computational text analysis with conventional qualitative methods. The development is the culmination of over five years' work supported by two National Centre for Research Methods grants... In addition to developing the method, the funding enabled us to create a range of resources and training events designed to build capacity in large-scale qualitative analysis'*.

This research group has developed open education and pedagogical resources, an archived teaching set, a textbook on their new method, and a resource hub. This has enabled **international knowledge sharing** (with take-up from various colleagues working in the Global North (Canada, Ireland, the UK and the USA) and the Global South (Bangladesh, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, South Africa, The Gambia). This work offers a shift in qualitative and mixed-methods data-analysis behaviours **towards open science**, enabling and encouraging the **re-use of secondary qualitative data**.

*'This is important because, despite increasing expectations on researchers to make data available for reuse as part of the open science agenda, many qualitative datasets remain un(der)utilised. Recent correspondence with UK Data Archive highlighted that, of their 1103 qualitative/mixed method datasets, 71% had been downloaded 20 times or fewer (with download figures likely to exceed reuse). Our method is, therefore, providing a new means of working with archived data, enhancing further the possibilities for reuse. As interest grows, it is likely the method will continue to impact on engagement with archived material.'*

The group have also had **cross-sector impact and reach**, for example, '*...social change organisation, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, is looking to employ the breadth-and-depth method to analyse a large volume of diary entries.*' The group continues to engage with and contribute to NCRM TCB activities.

#### 4.5 Career and Professional Development (Hypothesis 7)

The **relationship between participants learning with NCRM and the development of participants' career and professional development** was evidenced in the **NCRM 2023/24 User Follow-up Survey** impact survey; **78%** (n=220) of respondents to the survey reported that learning new skills (or improving existing skills) with **NCRM had benefited their career and personal development**. This was particularly reflected in open text responses. For example, one respondent wrote that:

*'Use of the methods learnt through NCRM training has been instrumental in my being successful at applying for a policy internship. I hope to gain experience in influencing policy through research for the future.'*

While this demonstrates an immediate impact on the career and personal development of this NCRM participant, it also offers the potential for secondary impacts longer-term, where this participant goes on to undertake policy work that provides societal benefit in future.

All of the applicants to the **NCRM 2023 Impact Prize and the NCRM 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Prize 2024** provided evidence of NCRM's impact on their career and professional development. Those that submitted applications between 2020 and 2024 wrote about the connection between their involvement with NCRM and the development of their methodological literacy, and their growth as a researcher. As with the open text responses to the NCRM 2023/2024 user impact survey, many were sure that there would be longer-term impacts from this involvement in the future.

The **NCRM 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Impact Prize 2024** invited submissions from researchers who have been involved with NCRM at any point in the 20 years that the Centre has been an ESRC investment. The intention behind this decision was to showcase the longer-term impacts that can be achieved through involvement with NCRM. It received a submission from Professor Lisa Roberts (University of Southampton and University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust), which made the relationship between learning with the NCRM and career and professional development explicit. Professor Roberts stated that her career had been 'transformed' by her ongoing involvement with NCRM between 2008 and 2014:

*'Through research mentorship and a training bursary from the NCRM, it has been possible to develop a research programme exploring communication in consultations between physiotherapists and people with back pain. This programme has directly contributed to undergraduate and postgraduate training for clinicians, a pipeline of clinical academics who are now running their own research programmes, and a training package for clinicians that has resulted in improvements in care, with statistically significant improvements in 'cultural competency' and 'patient enablement' for people from South Asian backgrounds, attending rheumatology consultations'.*

Impacts from this involvement, which were providing **societal benefits**, were still being generated in 2024.

When **interviewed**, some **NCRM stakeholders** noted a **relationship between their involvement with NCRM and successfully gaining jobs and promotions**.

*"My promotion to professor is absolutely linked to my NCRM [involvement] - it's been seen as an award and an accolade and affirmation of my methodological reputation - so the reputational prestige from NCRM is massive."* (Anonymised Testimonial Interview with an NCRM stakeholder)

Other NCRM stakeholders - for example Dr Phil Brooker, Senior Lecturer, University of Liverpool, and Dr Mark Carrigan, Senior Lecturer, University of Manchester - have associated their involvement with



NCRM with decisions to make job and **career changes in a non-linear way**, changing the direction of their career paths and research interests (case study submission 2022).

In interviews with NCRM stakeholders who are now in established careers, several identified a strong relationship between learning with NCRM and their career and professional development.

*“NCRM has been part of my career journey for a long, long time. It has always felt like a methods umbrella helping me through the next stage of that journey.”* (Anonymised Testimonial interview with member of NCRM Pedagogy Network).

These various observations on the career and professional development of NCRM stakeholders provide indicators that NCRM’s role, position and reputation (as being a provider of high-quality TCB courses, activities and resources) within the social science methods landscape has been integral to the development of social scientists, and other researchers, in the UK.

#### 4.6 Societal benefit: policy and practice (Hypothesis 8)

In its *Impact Strategy Framework 2020-2024* document, NCRM anticipated that there would be a temporal dimension to the impacts that would be generated by participant engagement with its TCB activities. The primary benefit/impact that it expected would be achieved rapidly, would be a change to beneficiaries’ knowledge and skills after accessing NCRM activities. A subsequent medium-term impact would be the application of this new knowledge and skills to beneficiaries’ research. NCRM’s *Impact Strategy Framework* anticipated that it would take much longer for NCRM’s beneficiaries to then deliver research that would meet the ESRC’s definition of impact: ‘the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy’. Thus, throughout this phase of funding, NCRM has been mindful that it will take time for its beneficiaries to evidence a relationship between applying their NCRM learning to their research, which may then go on to have **societal benefit**. This is borne out by the evidence gathered by NCRM. Many NCRM participants and stakeholders are on a pathway to achieving impact that has societal benefit (through sharing their research findings, and engaging with potential beneficiaries of these findings), fewer participants and stakeholders have been able to evidence significant societal benefit/change resulting from their research.

Responses to the 2023/2024 User Follow Up Survey (see Table 3), showed that some of those who had recently participated in NCRM’s TCB activities, resources and events were on a pathway of using their learning to achieve real world benefits.

**Table 3: Results of how respondents are utilising their learning**, from the 2023/24 NCRM User Follow Up Survey (n=282 survey respondents).

<b>Respondents report (multiple answers allowed):</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Their learning has had an impact on <b>professional practice or service provision</b>	32% (n=90)
Their learning has had an <b>impact on communities or society</b> in general	24 % (n=68)
Their learning has had an <b>impact on culture – contributing to the understanding or shaping of ideas, reality, values and beliefs</b>	19% (n=54)
They applied NCRM learning to their work to <b>influence the development of policy, shape legislation</b>	11% (n=32)
Their learning has had an <b>impact on economic or financial matters</b>	2% (n=6)

The open text responses in the survey provided various examples of how respondents had **applied their skills to facilitate real-world change in policy and practice**. For example, one respondent wrote that:

*‘... [our] team attended your training related to Hospital Episode Statistics. We have since been able to analyse the HES data and our first report from this analysis was presented to our local child safeguarding board and looked into patterns around children attending A&E and whether any safeguarding concerns were identified’.*

Another respondent wrote:

*‘I work with IDS TILDA (Intellectual Disability Supplement to the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing) which now has 5 waves of data and needs to expand to include fully longitudinal models. We are working on this and benefitted greatly from your courses. Our impact is phenomenal with impact on policy, good reach into HSE, Government Department of disability and services.’*

Most researchers submitting applications to the **2023 NCRM Impact Prize** were able to demonstrate that the application of methods and research skills learnt with NCRM had led **to short-term impacts that include policy and practice**, for example, they had made others aware of their research. Some applicants were able to demonstrate how others were using their work, and were hopeful of this leading to societal, economic, policy or economic benefits soon. For example, Dr Thomas O’Shea, a University Fellow at the University of Salford, demonstrated how attending Nick Bearman’s course

'Introduction to Spatial Data and Using R as a GIS' enabled him to work on the Adaptive and Resilient Coastal Communities (ARCC) project in Lincolnshire, providing a:

*'...benchmark for bringing together climate, physical event, and multidimensional deprivation data in a mapped format to support decision-making and resilience-building into a future made uncertain by the pressures of a changing climate, austerity, and cuts to key services.'*

(Dr Thomas O'Shea, University of Salford, submission to 2023 NCRM Impact Prize)

This work was undertaken with the Lincoln Centre for Water and Planetary Health and engaged key partners in the Environment Agency and local authorities of Lincolnshire. The work promises strong potential societal, economic and cultural benefits, but these will take time to emerge and be evidenced.

A few applicants, including the winners and finalists of NCRM's impact prizes, whose research was more fully developed, had achieved strong reach in disseminating their research, could evidence that others were using their research, and had begun to achieve societal, economic, and policy impacts which were positively affecting non-academic beneficiaries. Examples include the work of the winner of the NCRM 2023 Impact Prize, Lucia Guerrero Rivière's (doctoral researcher at the Wellcome Centre for Cultures and Environments of Health at the University of Exeter). Her work, co-producing a film-documentary *'Reborn Eyes: Story of a Movement in Resistance'* with a collective of people who had experienced ocular mutilation by police in Colombia, had positively shaped and developed the internal dynamics of the collective, as well as [publicising](#) their experience of state violence, experience of imprisonment and their search for justice. Another example of societal impact is Professor Jane Hirst's (and team at the Nuffield Department of Women's and Reproductive Health, University of Oxford) Innovation Fora work on machine learning approaches for complex clinical data, which established strong cross-sectoral collaborations (including with industry) to enable knowledge exchange and innovation that is in the process of improving the long-term health care of women who have experienced gestational diabetes.

NCRM can also evidence societal, economic and policy impacts from its work with stakeholders in previous phases of ESRC funding. A strong example is provided in the research work of Professor Jose Pina-Sánchez and team (School of Law, University of Leeds). In previous phases of funding (2011-2019), NCRM provided direct funding for the team to work on a methods research project to perfect a methodological approach for examining sentencing severity in England and Wales. The team attended various NCRM methods courses taught by world renowned experts, engaged in methods events and dialogue with NCRM methods experts, and attended two Research Methods Festivals. The end-product of this work was the development of a new index of severity of sentencing, which has had direct impacts on sentencing and the criminal justice system, with Professor Pina-

Sánchez and team having ongoing collaborations with the Sentencing Council for England and Wales, the Crown Prosecution Service, and the Parole Board. This represents a compelling case on how methodological proficiency achieved through NCRM can help improve public policy, and in so doing, enhance the common good. Since the completion of this project Professor Pina-Sánchez and team have maintained a close relationship with NCRM, delivering a session on ‘What Is Measurement Error (in in the Social Sciences)?’ at the 2021 NCRM Research Methods e-Festival, and delivering some of NCRM’s short courses, covering topics such as ‘Adjustment Methods for Data Quality Problems: Missing Data, Measurement Error and Misclassification’, ensuring that innovation in this area is shared with other researchers.

NCRM is confident that, over time, more of its beneficiaries will be able to evidence the societal benefits of research resulting from their involvement with NCRM’s TCB activities. To this end, NCRM’s discussions with members of the review panels for its two impact prizes have been productive in considering some of the barriers to researchers reporting on/evidencing their impacts. The NCRM impact prize submission form was adjusted in 2024, scaffolded to encourage researchers to consider non-academic beneficiaries, impacts beyond career and professional development, and the difference between reach, dissemination, and actual impact. In 2024, NCRM also ran two free workshops in April 2024, providing training on how to generate and evidence impact.

Given that the next REF exercise will take place in 2029, NCRM believes that further training on how to evidence impact, will be vital to the research community. However, we have observed that **engagement is a pathway to impact** that tends to be ignored by some researchers. Engagement - and related values such as ensuring the accessibility of research – as a pathway to impact needs to be built into research project design. There is a strong argument for NCRM/future initiatives to build impact skills and impact literacy into training and resources on research skills. These should not be targeted solely at doctoral researchers but should include mid-career and senior researchers.

#### 4.7 NCRM is ‘more than the sum of its parts’ (hypotheses 10 and 11) – strategic collaborations and leadership

NCRM has collected evidence which shows that its TCB activities have had **wide, cross-sectoral, national and international reach**, and have resulted in a range of impacts. These **impacts have included: transformations in participants’ skills, knowledge, methodological literacy and practice; participants’ application of new or improved knowledge to their research; building networks, collaborations, and communities of methodological insights and practice, bringing key strategic stakeholders together; developing innovative methods and sharing knowledge and best practice across disciplines and sectors; the transformation of careers and**

**professional development; and the delivery of research that has economic, societal, policy and cultural benefits – all demonstrating strategic leadership.** NCRM has observed that these impacts do not stand alone, many are **interrelated and cross-cutting**, with the consequence that they generate secondary impacts – **impacts that continue to enable NCRM to be more than the sum of its parts.**

This final section draws on findings from **interviews with NCRM’s Centre Partners and external stakeholders** adding to NCRM’s pool of evidence on its reach, significance and impacts.

#### 4.7.1 Evidence from NCRM’s Centre Partners

As outlined in the [Introduction](#) to this report, NCRM’s core team of the Universities of Southampton, Manchester and Edinburgh is complemented by its Centre Partners - nine, strategically selected institutions from across the UK which deliver and advise on training and are leaders in specific areas of methodological expertise ([see Appendix 1](#)). **Interviews with Centre Partners** were conducted, between May and October 2024, to gain their perspectives on how being part of NCRM had impacted on their institutions, and how these impacts had produced secondary benefits for national and international trends in research, for business and industry, for social policy, and for professional practices.

Building on earlier strong partnerships with other research centres was important. Using the Centre for Multilevel Modelling (CMM) as a specific example, this organisation also has a long connection and relationship with NCRM which began in the first phase of NCRM (2005 to 2008).

*“So, what we’ve done since 2020, and the impact we’ve had since then, is very much building upon that early history and has come out of NCRM funding”. (Testimonial interview with Professor George Leckie, CMM, University of Bristol).*

Drawing on NCRM support and funding between 2005 and 2014, the CMM has been able to develop MLwiN software, develop LEMMA training, and build institutional capacity. Investment from the ESRC and NCRM has enabled the CMM to develop its LEMMA programme, grow in reputation, and deliver long-term impacts over time (submitting three REF case-studies in 2021).

*“...the real success story of our centre ... is that fewer people use MLwiN than in the past. That sounds counterintuitive but the reason is that standard software packages, such as R, and Stata, and even SPSS, have now implemented an awful lot of what was only possible at one point in time in our standalone software. And that’s come off the back of all the training we continue to do, as well as software development, and the dissemination, all of which played a key part in making the technique so popular that it was in the interests of these big software*

*companies to implement it* (Testimonial interview with Professor George Leckie, CMM, University of Bristol).

During the current phase of NCRM funding the CMM has delivered NCRM training in multilevel modelling using MLwiN, R and Stata and has delivered bespoke training to governmental bodies such as UCAS, UK Health Security Agency, and the Home Office.

Other NCRM Centre Partners such as the Centre for Computational Science at the University of Exeter, the Timescapes Archive at the University of Leeds, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Liverpool, and the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit at the University of Glasgow, independently reflected on how their involvement with NCRM since 2020 has **enabled them to build capacity within their institutions, and contribute to the methods landscape and ecosystem**. Some Centre Partners described using their involvement with NCRM to **broaden the diversity of TCB activities** that they could develop and offer. For example:

*“What I wanted to get out of the partnership for Exeter, specifically, was not to do more of the same quantitative methods, but to allow us to develop, and to have a way of developing, our training around other types of methods. The Q-Step training was great for quantitative methods, but I am interested in all social science methods. So being involved with NCRM was an opportunity to broaden out the quantitative and computational training that we had done with Q-Step, and it provided us with an opportunity and the resources to broaden that training out and to address a number of methods training needs within Exeter.”* (Testimonial interview with Professor Susan Banducci, Centre for Computational Science, University of Exeter).

Beyond expanding its offered range of TCB activities (and benefiting from NCRM’s pedagogical expertise), Professor Banducci also noted that the Centre for Computational Science’s involvement with NCRM had enabled the Centre to develop its reputation further, but more than this, it had also given the Centre *“... a pathway to deliver the Centre’s methods development, as well as a platform to showcase what we have developed”*.

Echoing and extending these comments, Professor Michael Mair, NCRM Senior Fellow at the **University of Liverpool**, (independently) noted that his institution’s involvement with NCRM had enabled it to develop and **build interdisciplinary TCB activities, innovation, connections, and capacity across research-councils and across institutions**, thus also enabling the University of Liverpool to positively contribute to the broader research methods ecosystem.

*“I was able to, or I've felt free to - which is great of the NCRM - to develop things which are less connected to single centres. So, where there is an audience and a need, but they're not*



*necessarily grounded in institutional structures in the same way, I can speak to more perhaps fragmented communities and researchers, but also globally as well.”*

Work undertaken by Liverpool NCRM has enabled Humanities and Social Sciences at Liverpool to have greater connection, impact and reach - despite its relatively small size - through this less siloed way of connecting across disciplines, institutions and sectors. It has had a number of successes related to its interdisciplinary work, for example, it has delivered **groundbreaking NCRM Innovation Fora and outputs** relating to '[Investigative Methods](#)' and to '[Decolonial Research Methods](#)' which have had **global audiences** and which provide an indicative example of NCRM being 'more than a sum of its parts':

*“I think [NCRM] Innovation Fora are really important for involving postgraduate researchers and early career researchers so they can start to shape, and have conversations, and participate in interdisciplinary dialogues as well, and think slightly outside the box. Because I think that's going to be key for the next while ... because silo thinking is under challenge in a whole variety of different ways, but mostly at funding level. So, I think, yeah, [Innovation Fora are] a real support for researchers, full stop, and not just social science researchers.”*  
(Testimonial interview with Professor Michael Mair, NCRM Senior Fellow, University of Liverpool)

The University of Liverpool's relationship with NCRM is also enabling the University to have a strong **voice in shaping thinking on future research methods, and in initiating methodological innovation** in the social sciences:

*“... learning the lessons from the arts and humanities community around computational methods, I think is really important. That's not to say the social sciences don't have very distinctive things to offer... . However, there's a real disconnect and I don't understand why those conversations are so fragmented or so disconnected... . I'm very happy to have started the process of bringing digital humanities into NCRM”.* (Testimonial interview with Professor Michael Mair, NCRM Senior Fellow, University of Liverpool)

Professor Kahryn Hughes, NCRM Senior Fellow for the **Timescapes Archive, University of Leeds**, spoke about the role of the 'NCRM Timescapes 10 Festival' in building international capacity in longitudinal qualitative secondary analysis (with the secondary benefit of increasing the visibility and reputation of the TimeScapes Archive):

*“It's proved to be a meeting point for senior methodologists nationally and internationally to take forward their methodological advances and innovations, and to raise the profile of this methodological approach [longitudinal qualitative secondary analysis] and it has engaged, and*

*built it into the methodological language of, early career researchers, particularly across the UK. So, that's been absolutely critical."*

Professor Hughes also observed that from these primary impacts, secondary impacts are already manifesting - as "*contagion diffusion impacts*" - on the knowledge and understanding of research councils, data infrastructure groups, and funding and grant assessment panels.

Finally, Dr Emily Long, NCRM Senior Fellow at the **MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit at the University of Glasgow**, described the Unit as *delivering 'very policy orientated work on social inequalities'* that has broadened NCRM's capacity for generating impact:

*"Because we work on social inequalities, and with policymakers and we're very impact oriented, I think there is the potential for us to provide a lot to NCRM. We provide courses, relationships, and build capacity with people who actually make changes. So, we don't just work with academics on methods. Our entire first level of this building is open to the community and is about translating our science to the community. So, we're very invested in impact. We're doing methods for impact. We're doing methods for people outside of the ivory tower".*

#### 4.7.2 Evidence from NCRM's involvement with external ESRC stakeholders who are members of DR-TN and DTP-TN

Looking beyond secondary impacts generated through NCRM's work with its Centre Partners, **testimonial interviews carried out with external (ERC-funded) stakeholders** provide evidence on how NCRM relationships with external stakeholders has enabled it to achieve impacts that are more than 'the sum of its parts'. Interviews were with representatives of various ESRC investments which belong to, and attend, two training networks chaired and run by NCRM: the ESRC Data Resources Training Network (DR-TN), and the ESRC Doctoral Training Programme Training Network (DTP-TN).

These stakeholders identified various secondary impacts generated by NCRM through its involvement in these networks. Stakeholders attending the **DR-TN** observed that their individual organisational foci tend to be on data infrastructure, and thus they are relatively specialised organisations. They understood **NCRM to be a unique provider of training that other ESRC investments cannot deliver**. There was, therefore, unanimity, amongst those interviewed, that NCRM was in a unique position to take on the role of running these networks.

*"... NCRM is well-respected, everybody knows about NCRM. So, they're in a good position to do it because they cover training as a whole ... so, all the other services involved focus on very specialised types of data training, whereas NCRM ... has an overall view of it and it's*



*been around a long time, it is authoritative. So, and it's just good to have somebody like that, a body like that running it.”* (Anonymised Testimonial interview with member of the DR-TN)

**Interviewees described various ways in which NCRM had interacted with them through its role in the network, such as undertaking engagement work with individual organisations, delivering training, and providing access to its NCRM's evaluation questionnaires, which are now being used by several organisations when delivering their own training, and are used by the DR-TN network to evaluate its webinars.**

Going into more detail regarding the impacts of NCRM, one member of the DR-TN was of the view that **NCRM's involvement with the DR-TN had brought stability to the network, and was enabling the network to gain recognition within the data resources training community, and to gain recognition from the ESRC:**

*“And then NCRM began leading it. But the point was it grew from there and we invited more and more organisations to join. So, these new ESRC-funded data infrastructure or research infrastructure organisations, they joined in.*

*... we've also done joint bids from time to time. Not all of the organisations together, but you know, maybe two, three organisations”* (Anonymised Testimonial Interview with a member of the DR-TN)

Members of the **DTP-TN** described **engagement work undertaken by NCRM with the network, identifying training needs for doctoral students. This had been particularly useful in providing doctoral students with niche training that members of the DTP-TN were not able to provide.** ([See Section 4.1](#)).

When considering what would happen if there was no NCRM to run the DR-TN and DTP-TN networks Emily Oliver (Head of Research and Capacity Building, ADR-UK) observed:

*“I think NCRM is a very respected training provider, and they seem very well geared up to train. And, for example, I don't know if the [networks] would happen if it wasn't for them... I suspect that there would be a network [DR-TN] if NCRM wasn't there, but, you know, it would be less rich without NCRM in terms of knowledge and skills and insight and so on.”*

**Another DTP-TN member had concerns about potential changes to NCRM's remit in the future:**

*“If I think NCRM tries to become something different from what it is right now, so, almost like an overarching body that coordinates and helps DTP-TN to do that coordination, it might lose its focus.”* (Anonymised Testimonial Interview with a member of the DTP-TN)

In summary, interviews with internal and external NCRM stakeholders have provided insights into the relationships that NCRM has developed with its Centre Partners and its external stakeholders. They provide **evidence that NCRM has generated direct impacts that reach beyond the individual**. NCRM also **generates reciprocal institutional-level impacts** that are shared across the organisations that make up NCRM, across the networks and MSIGs that NCRM supports, and across NCRM's external stakeholders. In turn, these impacts generate further 'contagion diffusion impacts' at national and international levels – shaping understandings of what social science research methods and research are, and what social science research methods and research can do.

**Within the UK, it is clear that NCRM has a unique and valued role as a national provider of TCB activities concerning research methods.** The overall effect of its connections, and its reach, is to make NCRM 'more than the sum of its parts', reinforcing and strengthening NCRM's role and position within the research methods and skills training ecosystem and landscape, as an interconnected, central and integral lynchpin driving the development of UK (and international) research methods and skills.

## 5. Conclusion

This NCRM Impact Assessment Report illustrates the **significant, multi-dimensional impact** NCRM has achieved over its 2020-2025 funding period. Through its Training and Capacity Building (TCB) activities, NCRM has fulfilled - and in many cases exceeded - the types of impact outlined in its Impact Framework with the result that it is clearly, now, '*more than the sum of its parts*' (see Hypotheses 10 and 11, Table 1) - clearly demonstrating its **strategic leadership** within the TCB field. From these impacts - and the activities that underlie these impacts - NCRM has served as a **central, cohesive force within the UK's social science research methods ecosystem for the last 20 years, fostering an interconnected community of researchers and training providers that enriches the UK's methods landscape and enables ongoing interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration and innovation.**

Aligned with the ESRC's *Strategic Delivery Plan 2022-2025* and UKRI's *Strategy 2022-2027*, NCRM's work continues to support the ambition to build world-class research capability through the provision of high-quality, accessible, and low-cost training research methods training – training that has broadened access to participants from academic, business, charity, and public-sector organisations. Its reach is reflected in the sustained demand for NCRM's courses and resources, including over a million unique users and over 1.5 million views of online resources and more than 14,000 course and event participants, demonstrating strong uptake and one (of several) means for widespread continued impact.

## NCRM's Unique Role and Strategic Contributions

Since its founding in 2004, NCRM has carved out a distinctive position as the UK's trusted leader in social science research methods and skills training. This includes supporting, and developing, cutting-edge innovation in research methods through Innovation Fora, and delivering advanced and niche interdisciplinary methods training that has cross-sectoral reach. Its strategic partnerships with ESRC Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs), Training Networks (TNs), and public and private organisations have positioned NCRM as a lynchpin in the UK's methods training landscape. Bespoke training for government bodies, including the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Work and Pensions, has demonstrated NCRM's adaptability and commitment to addressing a wide range of methodological needs. Through its collaborative networks, NCRM has also established communities of practice, promoting sustainable learning and knowledge exchange that will continue to serve UK social science research long after the Centre's current funding period concludes.

## Recommendations for the Future of Methods Training in the UK

NCRM's legacy and the lessons from its impactful work offer useful and important guidance for the future of research methods training in the UK. Any new training investment should build on NCRM's rich collaborative engagement, and TCB activities and achievements and reflect critically on lessons learned. Prioritising Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) will remain essential to ensuring that training programmes serve an increasingly diverse audience and provide affordable training on inclusive, equitable, research methods and skills; and generate diverse academic and non-academic impacts. Building on NCRM's strengths in accessibility, future training programmes can amplify their reach through innovative communication tools, including video resources and other digital formats. Leveraging NCRM's model of collaboration with DTPs, training networks, and external partners could also help to sustain a cohesive, well-connected methods training ecosystem in the UK, especially as new methodological challenges and opportunities arise.

## Societal Impact and Professional Development

NCRM's influence on professional development and its impacts on societal structures in the UK are both evident through the numerous case studies of participants who have applied their NCRM training to affect policy, healthcare, social services, and beyond. Many of these impacts - such as the development of advanced data analysis techniques used to inform public policy and healthcare practices - highlight NCRM's role in equipping researchers to translate methodological expertise into real-world benefits. In future training initiatives, embedding a strong focus on impact literacy and application will be vital for ensuring that the societal benefits of methods training continue to grow. Training providers might consider offering dedicated support to help participants demonstrate their

research impacts, in line with the increasing emphasis on societal contributions in frameworks like the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

### A Legacy for the UK Research Landscape

NCRM's legacy as a central, innovative force in UK social science methods training endures. NCRM's cumulative achievements, from fostering inter-disciplinary and cross-sector collaborations to advancing accessible, cutting-edge methods training, have left an indelible mark on the UK's research infrastructure. NCRM's model of inclusivity, responsiveness, and methodological rigour offers a blueprint for future training providers who aim to support a vibrant, world-class research ecosystem in the UK.

In summary, NCRM has fulfilled (and exceeded) its intended impact goals and leaves behind a strong foundation upon which future methods training providers can build. Its role in connecting, empowering, and inspiring a broad spectrum of researchers will continue to benefit the UK's research and innovation landscape, ensuring that the high standards NCRM has established remain a benchmark for methods training excellence.

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## Appendix 1: List of NCRM's Centre Partners (2020-2024)

- The Institute for Social and Economic Research, (ISER) at the University of Essex, an interdisciplinary research institute and leading centre for the production and analysis of longitudinal studies, which is comprised of various well-established centres, surveys and ESRC investments.
- The Social Research Institute (SRI) at the University College, London (UCL), formed of five policy focused research centres which bring expertise in quantitative social science, time-use data, longitudinal data collection and analysis, systematic reviews and international comparison.
- The National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), a not-for-profit leader in the social research industry, and social survey industry. It is also a provider of training courses, learning programmes and bespoke training.
- The Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data (WISERD), a national, interdisciplinary, social science research institute, which is a collaborative venture between the universities of Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff, South Wales and Swansea. Its research spans the fields of economics, sociology, geography and political science.
- The Centre for Multilevel Modelling (CMM) at the University of Bristol, a research centre focusing on multilevel modelling. It has been involved in previous iterations of NCRM, delivering LEMMA courses (Learning Environment for Multilevel Methods and Applications).
- The MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit at the University of Glasgow, a research unit that has a particular focus on developing and using cutting-edge methods to understand how social, behavioural, economic, political and environmental factors influence health.
- The Exeter Q-Step Centre for Computational Science (C2S2) at the University of Exeter, which promotes education and research in the interdisciplinary field of computational social science, and combines scientific methods, statistical techniques, Artificial Intelligence, and machine learning to gain actionable insights from big data.
- The Timescapes Archive at the University of Leeds, a specialist resource of qualitative longitudinal research data. It was first set up in 2010 under the ESRC Timescapes Initiative and developed in collaboration with the UK Data Archive.
- The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Liverpool, which contributes expertise in qualitative methods; quantitative methods; investigative social research methods; visual methods; geographic data science/social data science; participatory methods and collaborative working; and, at an interdisciplinary level, digital humanities and arts methods.