National Centre for Research Methods

# Impact Strategy Framework

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# Executive Summary

The NCRM *Impact Strategy Framework* provides a detailed description of how we conceptualise and understand NCRM's impacts. The document underpins NCRM's *Impact Action Plan*, which sets out our strategies and plans for evidencing and evaluating our impact for the period 2023-2024.

After introducing previous work that NCRM has already undertaken, towards generating and evidencing our impacts (Section 2), the *Impact Strategy Framework* focuses on how and why NCRM generates impact, and how as an organisation we can provide evidence of the impacts that we generate. A key argument is that, in our unique position as a TCB provider, the impacts and changes that we generate differ to those generated by research organisations and studies that focus purely on research. Thus, our definitions of impact differ to those of research-focused projects and organisations.

We define our impact as the *strong positive effect that our activities and resources have on our beneficiaries* (Section 3). The range of effects on beneficiaries includes:

- The positive effect that our TCB activities and resources have on the *knowledge and skills* of academic and non-academic beneficiaries
- The positive effect that the *application of newly acquired or improved skills has on the work of our beneficiaries* (which can encompass non-academic and academic research, training, teaching, supervision, methods development) and *the subsequent effects of this work on others.*
- The positive effect that our activities have *on the methodological landscape* across and beyond the social sciences, and across different sectors (academic, private, public, and voluntary).

We argue that before we can begin to fully evidence our impact, we need to understand how and why our TCB activities and resources generate impact. To do this, we draw on 'theory of change' (Weiss, 1995) and hypothesise that we will generate 13 different types of impacts (see Section 4). We examine these hypotheses, outlining what changes/impacts we expect to take place, how and why these desired changes are expected to happen, and how we can evidence these changes. Hypotheses include expectations that there will be: changes to beneficiaries' knowledge and skills; beneficiary application of these skills to their work; this work going on to have economic, societal, policy and cultural benefits; the development of networks, collaborations and communities of practice; the passing on of knowledge to others; changes to employment; rendering NCRM more than the sum of its parts as an infrastructure organisation; benefiting the methods landscape (including the landscape of new and innovative methods); building sustainability; and the generation of unanticipated impacts.

This work on hypotheses has enabled us to identify some core **direct** impact aims (Section 5) for our TCB work:

a. positive changes to knowledge, skills, and competencies (gaining new knowledge and improving existing knowledge) – these are often immediate/short-term (up to 6 months) impacts

b. positive changes to practice (through the application of new knowledge, skills and competencies) – these can be short- or medium-term (6 to 24 months) impacts

c. positive changes to curricula and pedagogy - these can be short-, medium-or long-term (more than 24 months) impacts

d. positive capacity building effects experienced by attendees, trainers and NCRM staff, by identifying shared research or training interests, knowledge exchange, and developing new networks and collaborations

We have also identified some **indirect** impact aims:

e. positive multiplier capacity building effects with new skills being passed onto others in workplaces, educational settings or other communities (of both attendees and providers of events)

f. building capacity within the wider (UK) methods and social sciences landscapes – an ongoing dynamic impact

g. employment (of both attendees and providers of events) – these are often longer-term impacts

h. researchers and practitioners from academic and other sectors applying new or improved knowledge to research, that manifests as outcomes and outputs that are of *economic, societal, policy and cultural benefit,* as a consequence of having engaged with NCRM. These will take time to achieve, will be longer-term impacts, and can be instrumental or conceptual in nature

i. increased types of sustainability within NCRM

j. unintentional and unforeseen impacts

These impacts and changes will be produced by a variety of different beneficiaries and stakeholders, who will generate them as a consequence of their engagement with our TCB activities and resources (Section 6). Anticipated beneficiaries include doctoral researchers; established researchers at all career stages, and from across all disciplines and all sectors; teachers and trainers of social science research methods; NCRM staff, advisory board, and Centre Partners; other ESRC investments; and NCRM's various networks. We also anticipate having additional beneficiaries: people planning or commissioning cutting-edge research to address social issues, policymakers and stakeholders; the inter/national social sciences methodological landscape and community as whole.

We are confident that we will achieve our hypothesised positive impacts and our impact goals, and that we have identified the range of beneficiaries who will be involved with us in producing these. However, we also understand that we need to take account of the various facilitators and barriers to generating and evidencing positive impact (Section 7). Strong informed pedagogy, and high quality TCB provision, are fundamental to enabling and facilitating our beneficiaries to acquire and improve on skills and knowledge, and to implement their new and improved skills. We, thus, need to be able to evidence that our TCB activities and resources are high quality, well

taught, and impactful. Barriers to evidencing impact include confounding factors, beneficiaries' understandings of and definitions of impact, relying on beneficiaries to report impact, and difficulties in scaling and measuring impact.

Our companion document – NCRM's *Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* - outlines the various plans that we are putting in place to ensure that facilitators to impact are enabled, and barriers are addressed. Section 8 of the *Impact Strategy Framework* signposts the reader to our *Impact Action Plan 2023-2024*.

# 1. Introduction

NCRM is a unique methodological training infrastructure organisation that provides training resources that anticipate, respond to and meet the methods training needs of academic, voluntary, public and private sector researchers in the social sciences and beyond. As such, NCRM's impact on the work of its users, and on the methodological landscape more widely, is itself unique, and more complex than the definitions and understandings of research-related impact of its funder, the ESRC (see Section 3). For this reason, we have compiled this document – NCRM Impact Framework. The aim is to:

1. clarify definitions, understandings and descriptions of the different impacts that NCRM aims to achieve
2. identify how and why NCRM generates impact
3. signpost the reader to NCRM's *Impact Action Plan* 2023-24, which outlines our strategies for evidencing, showcasing and maximising our impacts during the remainder of phase IV of our funding.

Documents that accompany this Impact Framework document are the NCRM Impact Assessment Report 2020-2022, and the NCRM Impact Action Plan (2023-2024 - in progress at time of writing).

There is a strong interconnected synergic relationship between our impact related activities, training needs assessments, communication, sustainability, engagement, pedagogy, research and training and capacity building (TCB) work streams, which all inform each other, generating new ideas, innovations and impacts throughout the current phase of NCRM and beyond. The Impact Strategy should, therefore, be read in dialogue with other strategies and plans generated by these workstreams.

The document is structured as follows: Section 2 provides some background and context on NCRM, and previous work that the Centre has undertaken on impact. Section 3 outlines the NCRM definition and understanding of impact. Section 4 examines the theory of change being utilised by NCRM, describing *why* and *how* NCRM's activities and events will create change, and thus generate impact, and identifying different types of impact. The section also presents strategies as to how we will use the theory of change to evidence and evaluate impact. Section 5 summarises NCRM impact goals and aims. Beneficiaries of NCRM activities are outlined in Section 6. Section 7 discusses specific some of the facilitators and barriers to evidencing impact, and touches on some of the approaches that NCRM currently uses to generate, capture, evidence, and showcase its impacts, but signposts the reader to our Impact Action Plan 2023-2024 for details of our plan for evidencing impact over the next two years. Finally, Section 8

concludes the Impact Strategy by summarising its key points and directing the reader to NCRM's Strategic Impact Plan for 2022-2024, which sets out the plan for anticipated impact generation, recording, showcasing, amplifying and maximising activities for the period 2022-2023.

# 2. Background and previous NCRM work on impact

## 2.1. Background

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded [National Centre for Research Methods](#) (NCRM) has been in existence since 2004 and is currently in its fourth phase of funding. In its previous iterations, NCRM was funded to undertake training and capacity building (TCB) activities, and research-related methods. Since 2020, in-line with ESRC funding priorities and decisions, the Centre has shifted its primary focus to advancing methodological practice in the social sciences, and beyond, through TCB activity. (NCRM has also received some additional funding to undertake research projects on Changing Research Practices (CRP) during the pandemic, and the Future of Survey Data Collection methods (SDC) during and after the pandemic.)

The current phase of NCRM is led by an expert team from three internationally leading centres of methodological excellence: the Universities of Southampton, Manchester and Edinburgh. This core team is complemented by strategically selected institutions, the Centre Partners, which deliver and advise on training and provide subject expertise diversity. These nine institutions are currently UCL, NatCen, WISERD, Bristol, Exeter, Essex, Leeds, Liverpool and Glasgow.

NCRM's ongoing vision for phase IV of the Centre (2020-2024) is to:

> … *advance methodological practice in the social sciences and beyond, across all disciplines and sectors, through strategically informed and innovation-driven training, promotion of pedagogical excellence in methods teaching, and engagement, collaboration and partnership with users and other stakeholders.*

Innovation, engagement, communication and sustainability are at the heart of this vision. The Centre's strategies, policies and delivery of its various TCB (and research-related) activities have been shaped by eight specified objectives, which closely address ESRC expectations of the Centre, and ESRC strategy and priorities more generally:

> 1. Develop and implement a 'TCB Innovation Pipeline', including horizon scanning, systematic methodological audits and training needs analyses, to inform the TCB programme (see Figure 1, page 23).

> 2. Actively engage with users and key stakeholders across sectors and disciplines and coordinate research methods developments and training funded by ESRC across its portfolio of investments.

3. Advance and promote methodological understanding and practice in the social sciences and other disciplines and beyond academia, including government, third sector, business and industry, through an integrated and diverse TCB programme.

4. Develop, provide access to and promote high-quality training resources through a new online Portal.

5. Identify, implement, develop and share good pedagogic practice in research methods training.

6. Respond flexibly and nimbly to major challenges facing the social sciences today, including changes in the policy, data, research and technology landscapes.

7. Develop and explore a strategy for sustainable growth to bring in additional funding streams and user groups.

8. Maximise the potential academic, societal and economic impact of the NCRM's training and associated activities and resources.

These objectives all relate to, each other, and to the Centre's strategies and plans for communication, engagement, and sustainability and impact. They underpin the Centre's ongoing TCB programme, which includes core and advanced research methods. Course provision is complemented by a wide range of other, rich TCB and event activities, including large-scale flagship events, such as the Research Methods e-Festival (RMeF), or smaller, interactive, or targeted and/or interdisciplinary events such as bootcamps, spring/autumn schools, and bespoke training. TCB provision, including both topic selection and mode of delivery, is informed by strategic horizon scanning, training needs assessments and pedagogic research.

All TCB activities focus on identified priority areas to ensure NCRM is at the forefront of social science methodology training (for example, the Research Methods e-Festival included sessions on health, computational social science, digital and creative methods, and training courses have covered topics on how to deal with uncertainty and the impacts of Covid-19). Partially in response to the pandemic, we have implemented a major shift from mostly in-person training to online only delivery; and are now in the process of implementing mixed and hybrid approaches, continuously adapting our modes of delivery.

The eighth objective - to secure and maximise the impact of the Centre concerns itself with showcasing and maximising the cumulative effect of NCRM's TCB and research programme, and the reach, significance and indispensable nature of NCRM as a training and capacity building infrastructure. This would not be achievable without the strong relationship between NCRM's impact related activities, its training needs assessments, and its communication, sustainability, engagement, pedagogy, research and TCB work streams, which all inform each other. In doing so, they generate new ideas and innovations, which, whilst informing current work, will also guide and inform further phases of NCRM work, thus building future capacity.

## 2.2 Previous work on impact

In previous phases of the Centre, NCRM undertook various assessments of its impact (see 2018, 2013, 2011, 2010 and 2008). NCRM's impact assessments also relate to, and have been informed by, previous training needs assessments (see 2015, 2013, 2011, 2009, 2008, 2006 and 2005).

In the current phase of funding, we undertook an impact assessment that contributed towards the NCRM Midterm Review (2022). This work included reviewing literature on impact in Higher Education settings, drawing on existing inhouse work on impact strategy, and seeking stakeholder views. The assessment investigated how best to define and evidence impact, and how to contextualise impact within the goals and definitions set out in the 'Case for Support' for Phase IV funding. Stakeholders approached included: NCRM staff, the NCRM Independent Advisory Board, and other training organisations such as ISER, MiSoC and UKDS. The impact assessment also collected and gathered evidence of impact from NCRM event participants and trainers, and workstream organisers/leaders (this will made available through the NCRM website in December 2022).

This Impact Strategy builds on this work. It is also strongly related to the *NCRM training needs assessment* (2020), *NCRM's Communication Strategy and Plan* (2022) and its *Engagement Strategy 2020-2024* (2022) and annual *Strategic Engagement Plans*. The Impact Strategy has drawn on resources from ESRC guidelines and on impact and academic literature on producing, evidencing and measuring impact in higher educational settings.

# 3. Definition of impact

In section 3.2, we outline our definition and understanding of impact, but first, we look at definitions and understandings of impact offered by other organisations and research investments.

## 3.1. ESRC community definitions and understandings of impact

Our funder, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), provides its own definition of *research* impact:

> … the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy. This can include both:
>
> - *academic impact*, which is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes in shifting understanding and advancing scientific method, theory and application across and within disciplines
>
> - *economic and societal impact*, which is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research has on society and the economy, and its benefits to individuals, organisations or nations.

The impact of research can include:

- *instrumental impact* – influencing the development of policy, practice or services, shaping legislation and changing behaviour
- *conceptual impact* – contributing to the understanding of policy issues and reframing debates

The focus of these ESRC definitions and impact aims are on impacts related to *research* and thus are different from TCB impacts. (They are more compatible to NCRM's funded research-related studies, which include: (i) the Pedagogy of Social Research Methods; (ii) Changing Research Practices (CRP) during the pandemic; and (iii) Survey Data Collection (SDC) during the pandemic.) In a TCB context, (ESRC) research impacts will be indirect - a learner might use a methodology in research, which in turn can have an instrumental/conceptual impact, which can take a long time to materialise.

Consultations with other ESRC infrastructure investments, in particular the UK Data Service (UKDS) and Understanding Society, have shown that the understandings of impact held by these investments are focused on the specific services they provide, for example, the provision of data (although these organisations also offer training on how to use these data). Like these ESRC investments, NCRM's definition and understanding of impact also differs from the ESRC's research-led impact guidelines.

In this framework document, we therefore provide definitions and understandings of impact that are relevant and a good fit with the specific services that NCRM delivers. These are discussed in Section 3.2, below.

## 3.2 NCRM's definition of impact and timescales for impact generation

*Definition:*
We define impact as 'to have an effect on someone or something'. In the case of NCRM this is the marked or strong, positive effect/impact that our TCB activities and resources have *on the knowledge and skills* of *academics* and *non-academics*.

Breaking this definition down, this goes beyond the learning of new skills and knowledge, and includes:

- the effect of the *application of new or improved skills* on the work of NCRM beneficiaries

(This very direct impact will have further, less direct, effects and impacts, some of which fit with ESRC definitions described above, which will occur sometime after our beneficiaries have applied their new or improved knowledge and skills – these are outlined in Section 4 and 5)

- the marked or strong, positive effect that NCRM's research methods training activities have on the broader methodological landscape as a whole.

Drawing on the '*theory of change'* (Weiss, 1995), outlined in Section 4, below, we expect to provide *evidence* that NCRM's methods-training activities and resources generate positive impacts on, or *changes* to, our beneficiaries knowledge and skills; and their application of these skills to their research, and their training, teaching and/or supervision. In other words, these changes will occur as a **direct** or **indirect** *consequence,* of NCRM's beneficiaries' engagement with the Centre's high-quality training activities and resources in core and advanced social science research methods.

We expect these **short-term** (within 6 months), and **medium-term** (between 6 and 24 months) changes to a beneficiary's skills, and a beneficiary's application of these skills to research, to be generated after a beneficiary has accessed NCRM activities and resources; and we refer to these changes as intentional (aimed for) **direct** *consequential* **impacts** (consequential, because they occur as a consequence of beneficiaries' engagement with the Centre).

We also anticipate that beneficiaries will go on to experience/generate other changes and impacts (more in line with the ESRC's understanding of impact) over a longer period of time, as a consequence of their engagement with NCRM's activities and the application of newly acquired methods' skills to their research. Some of these impacts are likely to be several steps away from the point at which a beneficiary has engaged with NCRM activities. Nevertheless, they can still be attributed and evidenced as being a consequence of a beneficiary engaging with NCRM's research methods training activities and resources, that is, as intended **indirect, consequential impacts**.

The temporal dimension to our impact aims relates to how long NCRM anticipates that it will take for these impacts to be achieved. We anticipate generating various **short- and medium-term** impacts ahead of the **longer-term** (often over 24 months) impact goals that are identified by the ESRC. Additionally, the time it takes to achieve an impact often relates to whether an impact is a direct or indirect consequence of a beneficiary engaging with NCRM. Longer-term impacts, particularly those identified by the ESRC, tend to be indirect, take longer to generate, and are often more difficult to evidence, being nuanced and not easily quantifiable.

Only one of the ESRC definitions of impact - 'capacity building through technical and personal skill development' – is directly achievable by NCRM; this represents one of NCRM's medium-term impact goals.

In summary, because NCRM is unique in being a training infrastructure organisation, our impact aims are more complex than those set out by the ESRC, have a longer timeframe, are interdependent, and can occur as a direct or indirect consequence of a beneficiary engaging with NCRM.

# 4. Using theory of change to evidence impact and types of NCRM impact

Our definition of impact focuses on the effect, or change, that NCRM activities have on the knowledge and skills of those who engage with these, and on the subsequent work that our beneficiaries produce when applying new learning.  It is, therefore, important for us to be able to understand how and why our activities have an impact. To help us understand how impact and change are generated, and ensure that we are accurately predicting, generating and evidencing impacts, we have drawn on theory of change. The Centre for Theory of Change describes theory of change as '… a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context', essentially these are the steps required to achieve predicted impacts.

In this Section we outline how NCRM draws on theory of change to describe how and why we generate, and evidence, impacts. Section 4.1 begins with an introduction to the literature on theory of change. Hypotheses on how we generate different types of impacts are discussed in Section 4.2.

## 4.1 How NCRM uses theory of change to evidence/evaluate impact:

Our method and process for evidencing our intended consequential impacts has its roots in literature on the use of *'implementation theory'* and *'programmatic theory'* in evaluation (Weiss, 1995; 1997; and Rogers 2007), and on *'theory of change'* and evaluation in a higher educational (HE) setting (Rheinhold and Andrews, 2020; and Mayne, 2015).

Weiss (1997) and Rogers (2007) warn that there is a difference between implementation theory and programmatic theory, and that to evaluate change and impact, these theories need to be used in tandem. Many organisations draw on implementation theory to produce strong linear maps or *logic models* of their process for change. These are diagrams which detail the 'inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact' (Rogers, 2007, p. 64), that organisations aim for. Although logic models can provide very good demonstrations of an organisation's intended direction of travel, they tend not to be explicit about the processes involved in generating and evidencing change, and thus they:

> fall short of the conceptual summary involved in a *programmatic theory* because they do not examine the causal mechanisms involved in programs and policies' (Rogers, 2007, p. 64).

Both Weiss (1995, 1997) and Rogers (2007) argue that although it is important to map the pathway to change, it is just as important to identify and make explicit, the *implicit assumptions* about how change will take place – using programmatic theory - if change is to be robustly evidenced and evaluated.

Weiss (1995) coined the term 'theory of change' to describe the use of implementation and programmatic theory together, to evidence and evaluate aimed-for changes in a programme or intervention. Utilising a theory of change, involves identifying:

- the aims of a programme or intervention (outcomes, impacts, achievements)
- the various steps required to achieve these aims (direction of travel)
- the assumptions that underpin each step towards generating these changes (mechanisms that generate change)

Weiss argues that using a theory of change will enable those evaluating an intervention or programme to track whether planned for outcomes and impacts are generated and achieved.

In their work on evaluating STEM training in an HE-setting, Rheinhold and Andrews (2020) draw on Weiss' work, using the term 'theory of change' to describe how change and impact arising from STEM training can be generated and evaluated. They provide the following definition:

> The initial theory of change for a project is really a series of hypotheses about how change will occur. These hypotheses can then be tested to provide evidence that change has occurred (p. 3).

They also set out how a theory of change can be used in an HE context:

> A theory of change articulates the specific interventions that will be used to try to achieve preconditions and long-term outcomes. These represent the project's concrete activities. Developing well-articulated outcomes and preconditions helps a team choose interventions intentionally, as compared to a project that begins by planning its interventions and then stipulating what it hopes to achieve. Each long-term outcome or precondition is paired with a number of indicators, which describe the types of evidence needed to determine whether or not an outcome has been achieved. These indicators may be measured in a variety of ways, depending on the research methodologies adopted by a project. Finally, a project team articulates the assumptions behind the above elements and the linkages between them. These assumptions should be based in the prior experience of the project team and the research literature. *Nonetheless, because our collective knowledge of how change occurs in STEM higher education is incomplete, teams will still rely on some assumptions when they design a project.* (p. 3) (NCRM emphasis)

Drawing on these explanations, Section 4.2 identifies how NCRM impacts will be generated as a result of peoples' engagement with our various activities; and demonstrates how these direct and indirect impacts will be evidenced.

However, as with the case described by Rheinhold and Andrews (2020), we note that although we can provide evidence of how NCRM has generated direct and indirect impacts, the Centre also relies on some implicit assumptions relating to how impact is generated. For example, although we can evidence a connection between providing training to the beneficiaries of NCRM, and these beneficiaries then learning new skills (through for example: NCRM evaluation forms;

follow-up surveys; and follow-up interviews or focus groups of samples of users), there are still some unknown implicit assumptions that the organisation will be making about those attending its training. (For example, there is an implicit assumption that participants have slept well and are cognitively able to take on board training on the day; or that when attending online training, their internet connection on the day will be working well, enabling them to access all the activities and interactions taking place.) In this context, balance and common sense are needed when evidencing impact. Our aim, therefore, is that our hypotheses - as to how we will generate, and evidence, change - are clear, rational, and not overly complicated by possible, less likely assumptions. We acknowledge that there will be some implicit assumptions/variables that we cannot predict, that may affect a small proportion of our beneficiaries and how they experience our activities. However, there are options for NCRM to ask participants whether they experienced any unforeseen facilitators and impediments to learning and applying new skills.

## 4.2 NCRM's hypotheses on types of impact, and how these will be generated and evidenced

In this section, we set out 13 interdependent, simple hypotheses which demonstrate *why* and *how* NCRM activities and events will create change, and thus generate impacts for our anticipated beneficiaries (listed in section 6), outlining the different types of impact that we expect to generate and evidence.

These changes represent the first step in managing and delivering the various stages of intentional change and impact that represent NCRM impact goals and processes/logic model (as outlined in Section 5).

Some NCRM impacts have a direct link with the Centre's activities, and others have a more indirect link or pathway (these have more implicit assumptions attached to them). Descriptions of our anticipated direct and indirect consequential impacts are described in the hypotheses outlined below.

While we have identified intentional consequential direct and indirect impacts, we also hypothesise (see Hypothesis 13), that NCRM will also generate unanticipated or **unintentional** impacts, alongside its intentional impacts.

Although we list our hypotheses separately, we note that activities undertaken by NCRM generate a variety of impacts, and these are likely to be interconnected, synergetic, interdependent, cumulative and take place over time (longitudinally). When reporting on impact, the use of case-studies to showcase NCRM impact, and capture the longitudinal pathway of an individual's learning, and the role played by NCRM in that learning is probably the best way to provide evidence to support our different hypotheses, and the interconnected, interdependent nature of our impacts. We also note that whilst it is possible to evidence and showcase impact, it is very difficult to quantitatively measure impact (for further detail see section 7).

## TABLE 1: Hypotheses for impact

**HYPOTHESIS 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

| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
|---|---|---|
| *Short-term direct impacts are expected:* NCRM beneficiaries will advance their methodological literacy and practice. This short-term change will include participants: <br><br> • understanding and learning new research methods skills <br> • improving, refreshing, or updating their research methods skills and competencies | These changes will take place as a direct consequence of participant engagement with **high quality** NCRM resources, activities and events. <br> The changes will be enabled by the delivery of training resources that are: <br><br> • developed and delivered by internationally leading researchers <br> • supported by strong pedagogic expertise <br> • pitched at the right level (introductory, intermediate, advanced, or innovative, new and emerging) <br> • appropriate to a participant's research questions and the data they plan to work with <br><br> This change may not take place immediately. Learning can take some time to achieve. For example, a learner may need time to adjust to, and engage, with the ideas and methods being taught; and learning will need to be reinforced through practice, utilisation and implementation (see Hypothesis 2, and Section 7 on quality). | Participants attending NCRM training or using NCRM resources will be asked for evidence that their engagement with NCRM has resulted in a change to their skills. <br> They will be asked whether they are able to confidently apply these skills to their research or teaching. <br> (See section 7 on quality and pedagogy) <br> This will be done through NCRM evaluation forms, follow-up surveys, and follow-up interviews or focus groups of samples of users. <br> See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |

**HYPOTHESIS 2:** PARTICIPANTS THAT HAVE ENGAGED WITH NCRM TRAINING AND RESOURCES WILL APPLY THEIR NEW LEARNING AND SKILLS TO THEIR RESEARCH AND/OR TEACHING

| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
|---|---|---|
| *Short- and medium-term semi-direct impacts are expected:* NCRM beneficiaries who have learnt new skills (Hypothesis 1) will be able to:<br>• achieve competency in using these skills and their learning<br>• judge when and where to apply new methods to their research questions<br>• competently apply these methods to their research questions.<br>• address their research questions in robust and effective ways<br>• improve their teaching of methods to others<br>• teach new methods to others | NCRM beneficiaries who have learnt new skills and knowledge, through high quality training and resources, will, through practice of these methods learn how to achieve competency in the application of these skills, and will then be able to apply these skills to research questions, or to the training of others.<br><br>This hypothesis is dependent on Hypothesis 1 being achieved.<br>. | NCRM beneficiaries will be asked about how they have used our training and resources in their research and teaching/training practice.<br><br>This will be done through follow-up surveys; and follow-up interviews or focus groups of samples of users See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |

**HYPOTHESIS 3:** SOME PARTICIPANTS WHO ENGAGE WITH NCRM TRAINING AND RESOURCES WILL DEVELOP NETWORKS AND COLLABORATIONS DURING AND AFTER TAKING PART

| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
|---|---|---|
| *Semi-direct impacts are expected:* NCRM participants and trainers will | Some of the people who engage with high quality NCRM training and resources will develop relationships with others, during and after this engagement. These relationships may | NCRM beneficiaries will be asked whether their engagement with our resources has resulted in them |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| develop networks with others engaging with the same resources and activities. These networks may lead to:<br>• mutual support and help when applying new research methods<br>• collaborative development of new research approaches to substantive questions<br>• development of training/teaching of research methods, knowledge-exchange, and/or co-authored materials<br>• co-writing of funding bids and research proposals | resemble informal or formal networks and may involve those who led the NCRM activity. Events that generate relationships range from training courses, discussion events, or even an activity flagged as a network.<br><br>These new relationships may become mutually supportive and collaborative. | developing networks and collaborations. They will be asked for descriptions of the benefits that have arisen from these networks and collaborations.<br><br>This will be done through evaluation forms; follow-up surveys; follow-up interviews or focus groups of samples of users; and requests for case-studies. It will also be done through monitoring social media, and through the NCRM Communication Workstream/Team, who encourage NCRM stakeholders and users to celebrate the successes that come from engagement with NCRM<br><br>See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |

**HYPOTHESIS 4:** NRCM WILL ENABLE THE DEVELOPMENT OF INNOVATIVE METHODS IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES (AND BEYOND).

| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
|---|---|---|
| *Direct impacts are expected:* NCRM will enable the development of new, imaginative, innovative and/or experimental methods, and the sharing of knowledge and best practice in these methods, within (and beyond) the social sciences. | NCRM will enable and facilitate the development of new research methods within different communities of methods-practice. This will be done through the commissioning of innovation fora that bring together diverse experts to share knowledge and best practice on new, imaginative and innovative methods.<br><br>These developments will advance methodological understanding, training and practice within the social sciences | The engagement workstream assess and commission the innovation fora. On completion of the innovation fora, beneficiaries provide a feedback report on outputs, demonstrating the innovative changes that have been achieved. |

| | and beyond, and increase the quality and range of methodological skills and techniques.

These activities will also lead to the development of further collaborations, networks, and knowledge exchange (KE) events. | See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for further details of how we will evidence this impact. |

**HYPOTHESIS 5:** NCRM KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE (KE) EVENTS WILL ENABLE THE DEVELOPMENT OF NETWORKS AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
|---|---|---|
| *Direct impacts are expected:* Some of those engaged in NCRM KE events will develop deeper collaborative research, training, or pedagogical relationships with other NCRM beneficiaries.

The building of such networks will lead to synergy effects that are more than the sum of the event's parts.
These networks may lead to collaborative
- support
- generation of new knowledge and skills and innovations
- addressing substantive research questions
- seeking funding
- developing training
- sharing synergies
- bringing resources together
- creating communities of practice. | By developing knowledge exchange (KE) events and networks many of those involved in sharing knowledge will be inspired to further share their research practices and methods.
This further sharing of knowledge can lead to mutual and collaborative ways of working and can achieve more than individuals working alone.

Examples of existing NCRM KE networks are the Survey Data Collection Network (SDC-Net), Data Resources Training Network (DRTN), and Doctoral Training Partnership network (DTP-Net). | Beneficiaries will be asked whether, and how, engagement with NCRM has resulted in them developing collaborations and/or joining existing networks. They will also be asked for descriptions of the benefits that have arisen from these networks and collaborations.

This will be done through evaluation forms; feedback forms; follow-up surveys; follow-up interviews or focus groups of samples of users; and requests for case-studies. It will also be done through monitoring social media, and through the NCRM Communication Team, who encourage NCRM stakeholders to celebrate the successes that come out of engagement with NCRM.

See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |

| **HYPOTHESIS 6:** SOME NCRM BENEFICIARIES WILL USE NEW LEARNING TO BUILD CAPACITY WITHIN THEIR OWN COMMUNITIES | | |
|---|---|---|
| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
| *Medium-term indirect impacts are expected*: Some NCRM beneficiaries may bring their new learning and competencies into their workplace, educational setting, or other relevant community, thus building capacity.<br><br>This may also, then enable further capacity building within that beneficiary's organisation or community. | Some NCRM beneficiaries - who engage in high quality training, learn new skills or improve on existing skills, and become competent in using these skills - may bring their new learning into their workplace, educational setting, or other relevant community.<br><br>This process should enable multiplier capacity building within beneficiaries' organisations or communities. | NCRM beneficiaries will be asked for evidence that they have shared their learning with others in their workplace, educational setting, or community.<br><br>This will be done through follow-up surveys; follow-up interviews or focus groups of samples of users; and/or requests for case-studies; and other more creative methods (see the NCRM Impact Action Plan for 2023-2024).  It will also be achieved through monitoring social media, and through the NCRM Communication Strategy, which encourages NCRM stakeholders and users to celebrate the successes that come out of engagement with NCRM.<br><br>See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |
| **HYPOTHESIS 7**: SOME NCRM BENEFICARIES MAY GO ON TO GAIN OR CHANGE THEIR JOBS, OR JOB ROLES | | |
| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
| *Long-term indirect impacts are expected:* Some NCRM beneficiaries may go on to gain or change employment, gain promotion, or develop a new career direction. | Some NCRM beneficiaries - who engage in high quality NCRM training and learn new skills, or improve on existing skills, become competent in these skills, and then successfully apply these skills to their research or training - will be in a good position to demonstrate their skills and knowledge to would-be employers, or promotion boards. | NCRM beneficiaries will be asked whether they believe that they have gained or changed their employment, or career path, or received promotion, as a direct or indirect consequence of learning new skills from NCRM. This will |

| | Those benefiting in this way could be attendees of events, trainers or those involved in NCRM research projects. For example, we already have evidence of trainers changing employment, discipline and/or career direction as a direct consequence of their involvement with NCRM (see Carrigan and Brooker's case-study in Annex 8 of NCRM's MTR). However, we anticipate that this change is most likely to occur amongst doctoral researchers. | be done through follow-up surveys; follow-up interviews; or focus groups of samples of users.<br><br>(NCRM's direct role in enabling employment may be hard to evidence, except in cases such as those described in Annex 8 of the MTR.) |
|---|---|---|

**HYPOTHESIS 8:** SOME NCRM BENEFICIARIES WILL APPLY THEIR NEW OR IMPROVED SKILLS IN RESEARCH THAT GOES ON TO PROVIDE ECONOMIC, SOCIETAL, POLICY AND CULTURAL BENEFITS

| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
|---|---|---|
| *Long-term indirect impacts are expected:* Some NCRM beneficiaries who apply their new learning research may go on to produce outcomes or outputs that are of economic, societal, policy or cultural benefit | Some NCRM beneficiaries who engage in high quality training that is pitched at the right level for them, and who learn new skills and/or improve on existing skills, may then successfully apply these skills to their substantive research questions. They may (then or later) achieve outcomes or outputs that are instrumental or conceptual in nature (these terms are explained in section 3), and have economic, societal, policy, and/or cultural benefit. | NCRM beneficiaries will be asked whether, and how, they have applied their training in the process of achieving academic or non-academic outputs that have been of economic, societal, policy, and/or cultural benefit. Good definitions of these terms will be provided to enable users to fully understand what they mean.<br><br>This can be done through follow-up surveys; follow-up interviews; focus groups of samples of users; and requests for case-studies. It can also be achieved by monitoring social media, and through engagement with the NCRM Communication Workstream Team who encourage NCRM stakeholders and users to celebrate successes that come out of engaging with NCRM events. (Researching digital |

| | | resources such as policy citations indices would not necessarily provide this evidence directly, because NCRM would then need directly ask authors of policy reports whether NCRM had provided the resources for them to learn the methods used in their research).

See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |

**HYPOTHESIS 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

| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
|---|---|---|
| *Long-term direct benefits:* Some NCRM beneficiaries who apply their new learning research may go on to produce outcomes or outputs that are of economic, societal, policy or cultural benefit | Some of those who have undertaken NCRM research on methods (these are likely to be people who held fellowships in Phase III, but also those involved with the CRP and SDC-Net projects) and have applied their new knowledge to research will also go onto achieve outcomes or outputs that are instrumental or conceptual in nature (these terms are explained in section 3), and are of economic, societal, policy, and/or cultural benefit. | By asking those involved in NCRM research methods research grants, and the CRP and SDC-Nets to report back on their successes.

See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |

**HYPOTHESIS 10:** THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF NCRM'S WORKSTREAMS WILL MAKE NCRM MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS AS AN INFRASTRUCTURE ORGANISATION:

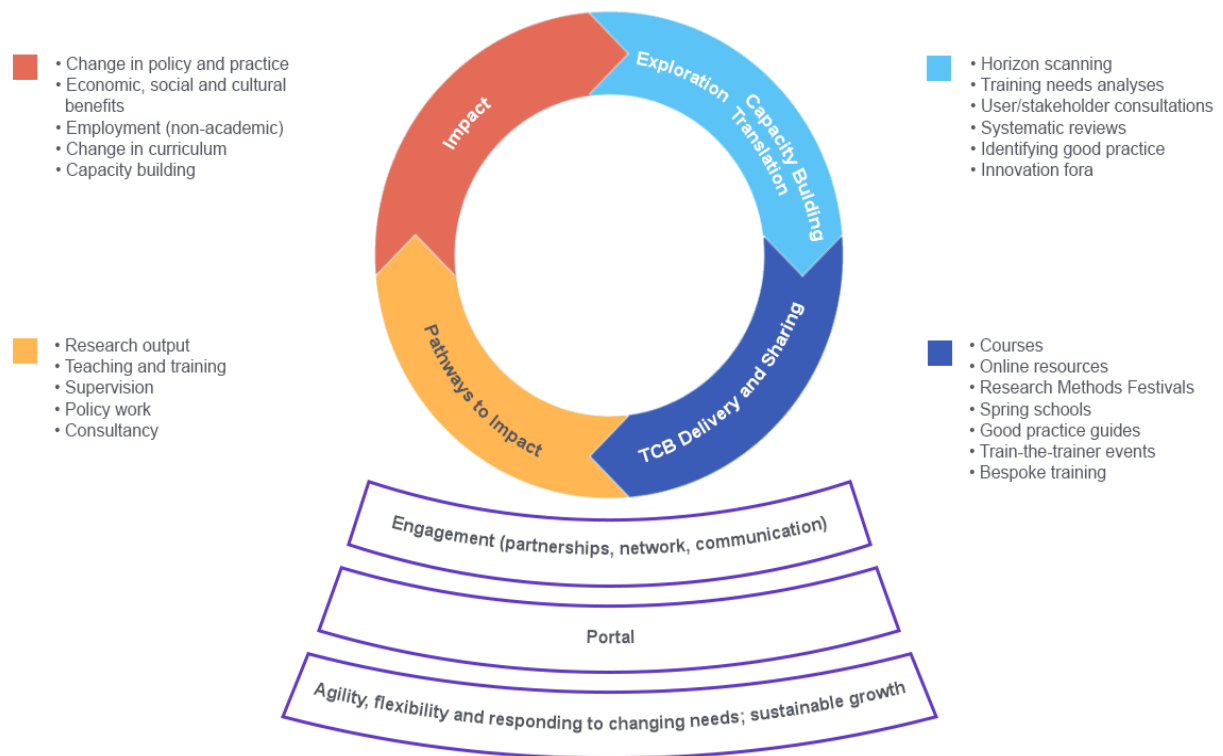| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
|---|---|---|
| *A variety of direct and indirect, short-, medium- and long-term impacts are expected:*<br>• NCRM will generate a series of different types of impacts continuously over time, which will impact on, and inform NCRM infrastructure, in an iterative manner.<br>• Evaluation of these impacts will then inform and generate new NCRM outputs<br>• New outputs will impact on the methodology landscape of the social sciences and beyond. | Rheinhold and Andrews argue that an organisation's theory of change is an iterative process:<br>     'The initial theory of change for a project is really a series of hypotheses about how change will occur, and these hypotheses are investigated and revised as the project proceeds. Ongoing projects constantly reconsider and revise their theory of change as they gather data that indicates whether and how their efforts are working.' (p. 3)<br>In the case of NCRM, we anticipate (a) that the changes generated by our various workstreams will be reviewed, reflected on, and revised during the lifetime of the Phase IV of the Centre; (b) that impacts that occur continuously over time will impact on NCRM's infrastructure, informing the development of our different workstreams, and building capacity within our workstreams and workforce, in an iterative manner.<br>We expect that this generation of impacts will create a virtuous circular relationship/feedback loop between:<br>• delivery of different workstreams (particularly engagement, communication, sustainability and the TCB programme) and impact to social science communities<br>• evaluation and assessment of these impacts by these workstreams<br>• feedback from academic and non-academic social science communities (other communities such as health sciences may also engage with NCRM and provide feedback)<br>• the generation of new deliverables and impacts by stakeholders and workstreams, which will in turn inform | By keeping accurate records of impacts generated by the various workstreams and how these have informed NCRM as a whole; and by applying dynamic systems theory to these records.<br><br>See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |

| | these workstreams (and the next iteration of NCRM) - describing an iterative process (see Figure 1, p.23), i.e. the different processes and NCRM workstreams will generate impact at all stages, and across all workstreams. | |
|---|---|---|

**HYPOTHESIS 11:** THE ORGANISATION WILL CONTINUE TO DEVELOP INTO MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS ENABLING IT TO BENEFIT THE METHODS LANDSCAPE

| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
|---|---|---|
| *Various short-, medium- and long-term changes are expected:* We will <ul><li>identify new and emerging research methods training needs, and emerging experimental and innovative methodological approaches</li><li>respond flexibly and nimbly to major challenges facing the social sciences today</li></ul> In doing so, we will contribute new benefits to the UK and international methods landscape (within and beyond the social sciences), and show that NCRM is more than the sum of its parts. | NCRM is an infrastructure organisation, with highly active, high-quality engagement, resources, communication, and TCB workstreams.<br><br>We are uniquely placed to enable navigation of the methods landscape, and various research communities, and to identify new and emerging research methods training needs and emerging experimental and innovative methodological approaches, that can be, and need to be, developed and shared with others.<br><br>Our internal processes, such as the implementation of our 'TCB Innovation Pipeline' (which includes horizon scanning, systematic methodological audits and training needs analyses that inform the TCB programme throughout the lifespan of Phase IV) mean that we can and will respond flexibly and nimbly to major challenges facing the social sciences today. These challenges include changes in the policy, data, research and technology landscapes, and the promotion and development of training in innovative methodologies.<br><br>Our complex work in identifying training needs, innovations, and new challenges will enable us to provide strong benefits to the methods landscape. | <ul><li>We will work with beneficiaries to produce case-studies (in different formats and media) showcasing how NCRM has been able to identify and develop training in new and emerging innovative methodologies</li><li>We will track and evidence our record in identifying existing and new training needs, and in delivering TCB activities that meet these needs.</li><li>We will ask beneficiaries to produce testimonials</li></ul> See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |

| | There is a direct relationship between identifying need and the development of NCRM TCB activities and resources. However, there is a subsequent indirect relationship between these processes and the building of NCRM's reputation, rendering the Centre more than the sum of its parts and enabling it to benefit and shape the research methods landscape. | |

**HYPOTHESIS 12:** NCRM WILL GRADUALLY BUILD ITS (FINANCIAL) CAPACITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Direct and indirect impacts are expected:*<br>By continuing to build our strong reputation in the methods landscape we will generate new opportunities for bespoke training and saleable training services, and new income streams, which will contribute to increasing financial capacity and stability. | NCRM's various workstreams (and in particular our engagement workstream) enables the identification of training needs, opportunities and audiences. Through this work, and our growth in reputation, we are able to provide bespoke training for non-academic organisations (for example, we have provided training to Innovate UK and to the Ministry of Justice).<br>We hypothesise that one of the consequences of reputational growth and delivery of bespoke training impacts, is that we are building our reputation for high quality, saleable services that could, in turn, increase our (financial) capacity and sustainability.<br><br>In this hypothesis there is a direct and indirect relationship between our identification of opportunities, delivery of bespoke training, the intended creation of new income streams, and our development of capacity and sustainability. | Through NCRM financial accounts and income streams.<br><br>See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |

**HYPOTHESIS 13:** NCRM WILL GENERATE UNANTICIPATED IMPACTS

| What changes are expected | How and why desired changes are expected to happen | How these will be evidenced |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Various unanticipated direct and indirect impacts:* | NCRM will generate impacts that were not intended or foreseen. (For example, an unanticipated impact might be generated when NCRM is approached by an external stakeholder and | Evidence to support this hypothesis may emerge during the process of evaluating impact. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| NCRM will generate various impacts during phase IV of its funding. Some of these impacts will not have been anticipated by our various workstreams. | offered the opportunity to engage with a new piece of work; or we may build capacity within our workforce to take work in new methodological directions; or provide our administrative staff with new skills).<br><br>These may be direct or indirect unintended impacts. | We will work with our stakeholders to ensure we capture unforeseen impacts. We will also consider different theories and concepts as a way of identifying new impacts.<br><br>See *NCRM's Impact Action Plan 2023-2024* for details of how we will evidence this impact. |

Figure 1: Demonstrating NCRM's interconnected workstreams



• Change in policy and practice
• Economic, social and cultural benefits
• Employment (non-academic)
• Change in curriculum
• Capacity building

• Horizon scanning
• Training needs analyses
• User/stakeholder consultations
• Systematic reviews
• Identifying good practice
• Innovation fora

• Research output
• Teaching and training
• Supervision
• Policy work
• Consultancy

• Courses
• Online resources
• Research Methods Festivals
• Spring schools
• Good practice guides
• Train-the-trainer events
• Bespoke training

# 5. Summary of NCRM's impact aims/goals

This Section translates the hypotheses discussed in Section 4, into direct and indirect impact aims/goals, summarising our impact expectations into a short form which we can reference in other relevant documents that we produce.

In summary, NCRM aims to achieve the following **direct** impact goals:

k.  positive changes to knowledge, skills, and competencies (gaining new knowledge and improving existing knowledge) – these are often immediate/short-term impacts

l.  positive changes to practice (through the application of new knowledge, skills and competencies) – these can be short- or medium-term impacts

m.  positive changes to curricula and pedagogy (for example, trainers and teachers develop improved or different training or courses, as a consequence of having engaged with NCRM) - these can be short-, medium-or long-term impacts

n.  positive capacity building effects experienced by attendees, trainers and NCRM staff, by identifying shared research or training interests, knowledge exchange, and developing new networks and collaborations

o.  development of innovative, imaginative collaborative methodologies that inform the social science methods landscape (through engagement, collaborative events and knowledge exchange facilitated by NCRM)

NCRM aims to achieve the following **indirect** impact goals (these may not always happen, and can be harder to evidence):

p. positive multiplier capacity building effects with new skills being passed onto others in workplaces, educational settings or other communities (of both attendees and providers of events). For example, these effects can impact on commissioning / funding organisations such as UKRI; or can affect NCRM itself. These are often medium-term impacts.

q. building capacity within the wider (UK) methods and social sciences landscapes – this is an ongoing dynamic impact

r. employment (of both attendees and providers of events) – these are often longer-term impacts

s. researchers and practitioners from academic and other sectors applying new or improved knowledge to research, that manifests as outcomes and outputs that are of *economic, societal, policy and cultural benefit* as a consequence of having engaged with NCRM. These will take time to achieve and be longer-term impacts and can be instrumental or conceptual in nature

t. increased types of sustainability within NCRM – this is a longer-term impact

u. unintentional and unforeseen impacts – these are likely to be longer-term impacts

# 6. Beneficiaries of NCRM activities

The impacts that NCRM aims to generate will affect/impact certain individuals, organisations, communities, societal groups and methodological landscapes - some directly, some indirectly.

NCRM anticipates that the **direct beneficiaries** of its activities will include:

- doctoral researchers
- established researchers at all career stages, from disciplines within and beyond the social sciences, and from across all sectors, including those working in central and local government, the Office for National Statistics, public and third sector organisations, commercial and not-for-profit data collection agencies and in commercial and market research industries
- teachers and trainers of social science research methods will benefit significantly from the coordination and support of their pedagogic development.
- NCRM staff, advisory board, and Centre Partners
- Other ESRC investments
- NCRM networks (including CRP, Data Resources Training Network (DR-TN), Doctoral Training Partnership Training Network (DTP-TN), SDC-Net).

NCRM anticipates that the **indirect beneficiaries** of its activities will include:

- people planning or commissioning cutting-edge research to address social issues, policymakers and stakeholders (and other users of research outputs occurring as a consequence of NCRM's activities and resources being used)
- the inter/national social sciences methodological landscape and community as whole (For example, NCRM is uniquely placed to identify and make collaborations with those involved with emerging methodological innovation, with a view to promoting and developing training in new and experimental research methods)
- UKRI
- Societal groups and communities

Beneficiaries can be at an individual, group, network, organisational, infrastructure, community, national and international level.


# 7. What NCRM has been, and is (currently), doing to generate and evidence impact

## 7.1. Generating impact through the lifespan of NCRM IV (The Innovation Pipeline)

Inhouse work, first developed by the NCRM team in its 'Case for Support' when we applied for Phase IV funding, and further developed during the first two years of our funding, mapped out NCRM's pathways to impact. The most recent pathways work is the 'Pathways to exploration, delivery and impact' diagram presented in the 2022 Midterm Review (see Figure 2, p. 27). This diagram, and the conceptual thinking underpinning it, act as a *logic model* (this term is explained in Section 4.1), providing a generalised map of the processes required for NCRM to achieve demonstrable economic, policy, cultural, societal, and other long-term benefits and impacts. Essentially, this diagram acts as an overview/guide outlining the pathways or trajectories required to generate these benefits; and identifying the actors who will make these benefits happen. Work on achieving these impacts has been ongoing since Phase IV began in 2020.

Although Figure 2 is linear, it is more useful to conceptualise these pathways as taking a circular route, and thus to refer again to Figure 1, and note how these different processes and pathways can generate impact at all stages, and across all workstreams. These processes and pathways are also iterative, generating impact, and influencing NCRM's policies and practice at all points in the lifespan of the current phase of NCRM, and beyond.

The processes outlined in Figure 2 include:

1. Exploratory work, horizon scanning, reviews of training needs and collaborative identification of innovation and needs - this is an impactful 'circular' process (some of which is informed by legacies from earlier phases of NCRM)

2. TCB delivery and impact generating activities (for example, courses, bootcamps, Research Methods Festival, online resources, networks, innovative and experimental workshops, bespoke training) and engagement of *non-academic* and *academic* participants
3. Ongoing work on NCRM's funded research-related studies – currently the Pedagogy of Social Research Methods; and Survey Data Collection during the pandemic.

These first three processes can generate impact by creating changes in the stakeholders and participants benefiting from these processes and activities. The next three processes represent minor impacts in themselves, which in turn are likely to generate the further broader impacts identified in the 'Impact' box in Figure 2:

4. teaching and training by participants
5. academic and non-academic research outputs (for example, reports, guides, publications, funding) generated by participants, trainers, and NCRM core staff
6. commissioning and consultancy undertaken by participants

These pathways would not work without the input of NCRM's various workstreams, resources, and management and governance bodies, which are vital to the generation, evidencing, and celebration of impact.

Figure 2: NCRM Pathways from Exploration to Delivery to Impact (NCRM Workstreams and Objectives)
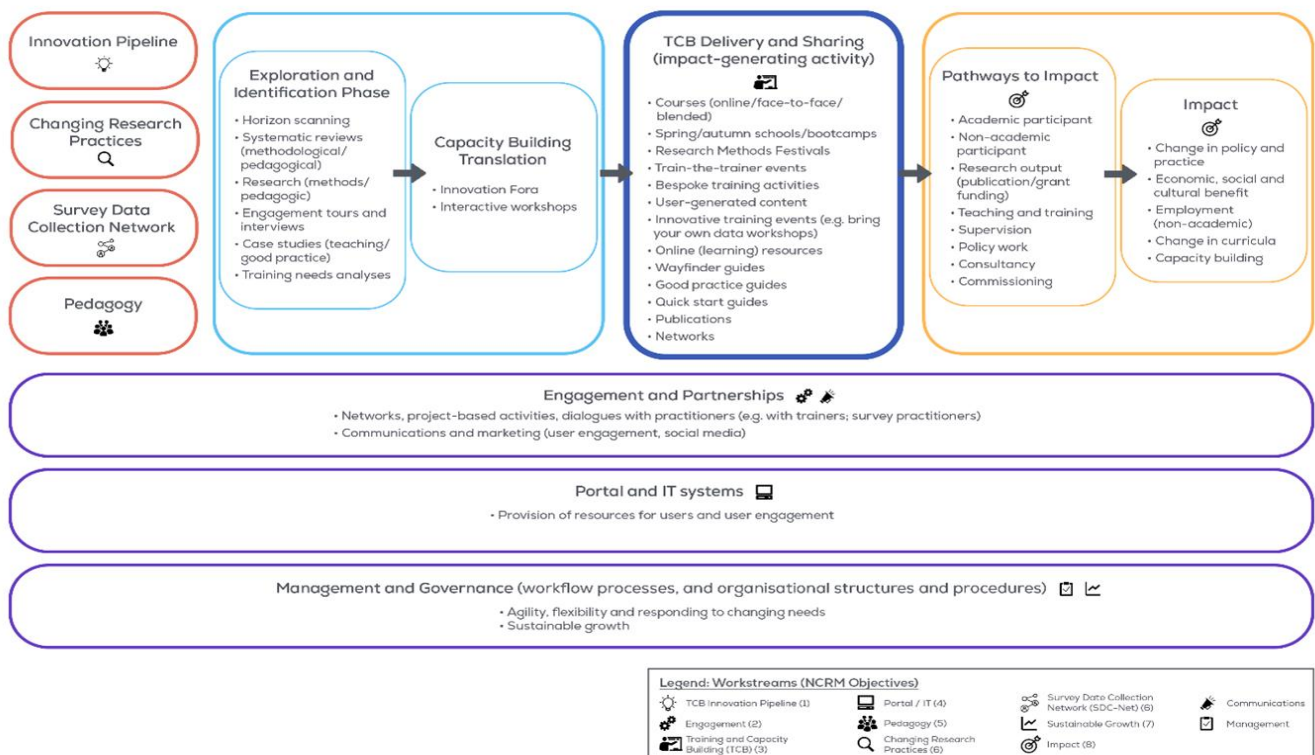


Section 7.4 below, provides more detail about some of the approaches and processes that NCRM's various workstreams use to enable this logic model to be successful, and for NCRM's

impact generation goals to be ensured, evidenced and showcased. First, however, in Sections 7.2 and 7.3, we discuss some of the facilitators and barriers to evidencing impact.

## 7.2 Quality as a facilitator of impact

A core issue to consider, when generating and evidencing impact, is the quality of the resources that NCRM offers. Without attention to and assurance of quality, we will not succeed in generating strong impact.

Hypothesis 1, in Section 4, suggests that

> … if NCRM's resources, activities and events are of *high quality* (with good resources developed and delivered by internationally leading researchers, supported by strong pedagogic expertise), *at the right level* (introductory, intermediate, advanced, or innovative, new and emerging), and *appropriate* (to research questions and data available) for those attending, those in receipt of training will either (a) learn new research methods skills, or (b) improve, refresh or update their research methods skills and competencies.

The success of many of our intended impacts pivots on this hypothesis being realised, and we must ensure that we are checking the quality of the training and resources that we provide. Beneficiaries play the greatest role in reporting on quality, through completing evaluation forms, follow-up surveys, and follow-up interviews or contributing to focus groups. However, the TCB team, and in particular, trainers, NCRM's Centre Manager and TCB co-ordinators also play vital roles in ensuring quality, by:

- identifying and reporting any quality concerns raised by participants (whilst being aware that participants may not present their concerns as a quality issue)
- translating pedagogic work into practice
- enabling participants to pick training that is at the appropriate level
- ensuring participants have enough information to decide whether training, or a resource, are appropriate to their research questions and data.

## 7.3 Considering pedagogy

Success also pivots on how participants engage with training and resources, how they learn, and how pedagogy informs the learning process.

Nind et al (2022, forthcoming) emphasise the need for pedagogic culture and theoretical pedagogical dialogue in methods training, and describe how they are attempting

> "… to make explicit some of the skills, knowledge and processes at work in research methods education so that the community of stakeholders can better understand how methods capacity is being sought or developed" (p.6).

They also note that

"There are indicators in the literature that methods teachers are drawn to student-centered learning approaches, promoting hands-on experience and facilitating critical reflection, but development of these pedagogic approaches may be constrained by a lack of engagement with theories and research associated with their use" (p.7).

Drawing on Nind et al's work, there is, therefore, an argument for making room within NCRM for creating a separate theory of change for hypothesis 1, drawing on pedagogical literature to examine how impactful, high-quality training and learning might be achieved (see NCRM Impact Action Plan 2023-24). This work could be informed by ongoing work on pedagogy by Nind et al within NCRM.

## 7.4 Barriers to evidencing impact

Identifying and capturing evidence that an activity has had an impact (see Section 4) is inherently difficult. There are a variety of interrelated reasons for this, which we outline below (but we recognise there are likely to be other difficulties, which we have not listed and discussed):

Relying on beneficiaries to report impact: Although individuals using NCRM resources and activities may be generating impact, NCRM is reliant on stakeholders reporting the impacts that they generate as a consequence of their engagement with NCRM. Although we have put in place a variety of processes to capture evidence of impact, this will always be reliant on the goodwill of those using NCRM resources, whom we ask to report impact.

An additional issue is that not all beneficiaries will have a good understanding of impact. Therefore, NCRM needs to provide any self-reporting beneficiaries with clear definitions for impact. This will be particularly important when encouraging use of more creative ways of collecting and collating impact stories from beneficiaries.

Invisible impact: Impacts can be hidden, invisible and impossible to capture and evidence. For example, an academic or non-academic might download a resource from our portal and use it to inform or guide their research methods. However, we will probably never be aware of this specific downstream use.

Confounding factors: There may be other additional confounding factors that affect how beneficiaries of NCRM resources and activities believe they begin using or applying a method, skill, technique or piece of knowledge. For example, an academic beneficiary might attend a training course on a particular method, and subsequently make changes to their own teaching. However, their primary reason for explaining to themselves why they made these changes might be that they read a book on the topic, rather than because they attended an NCRM training course.

Measuring and scaling issues: Although we are confident that we can convince stakeholders to report impact, it is difficult to measure the full breadth of impact, which often takes a long time to generate. Measuring and quantifying the impact that a particular activity has had on NCRM stakeholders at scale is almost impossible. Qualitative descriptions of impact, case-studies and

testimonials seem like the best way of evidencing impact, but these methods are likely to lack quantitative data that measures impact (such as quantitative key performance indicators)

Intended vs unintended impacts: Unintended impacts are difficult to capture because they are not expected, and we are reliant on our stakeholders reporting unintended impacts.

## 7.5 How NCRM's workstreams currently evidence impact

The NCRM midterm review report to the ESRC (2022) included an assessment of impact activities, for the period 2020-2022. We gathered information and evidence on impact via a wide variety of case studies, testimonials, interviews with stakeholders (individuals and organisations), users and TCB participants, trainers of NCRM courses, follow-up (online) impact surveys of users and TCB participants, reviews of uptake and comments to online resources and the YouTube channel, review of NCRM course evaluations forms (2020-2022), review of all NCRM outputs including publications, and a request to users to report on impact via NCRM social media channels (in particular Twitter) and the NCRM newsletter. As a result, we have been able to demonstrate a rich set of impacts across a wide range of activities. (The results are summarised in Annex 8 of the midterm review report and will be further summarised in NCRM's Impact Assessment Report 2020-2022, to be made available via the NCRM website.)

The following outlines some of the contributions that the different teams and workstreams currently make in generating impact, providing evidence that impact has occurred, and showcasing significant impacts. Given the roles that these teams play in relation to impact, the existing strong communication and dialogue between NCRM's different workstreams represents a key tool in capturing as much evidence of impact as possible.

Engagement team: The *Engagement Strategy 2020-2024* and annual *Strategic Engagement Plans* demonstrate how the engagement team is a key starting point for NCRM impact generation. The engagement pyramid (see Figure 3) highlights at its apex (level 5) how engagement work has collaboration as its goal. The engagement team's various activities such as stakeholder consultation, engagement tours, network co-ordination and methodological special interest groups, collaborative and bespoke work, horizon scanning and identification of innovation and experimental methods, knowledge exchange work, all represent activities that generate impact. The team is, therefore, in a unique position to collate *impact stories, case studies* and *testimonials* at the endpoint of delivery of these activities (the apex of the engagement pyramid); but, also, to revisit and to *follow up* those providing these testimonies at a later date, to identify any emerging longer-term impacts.

Figure 3: Engagement Pyramid
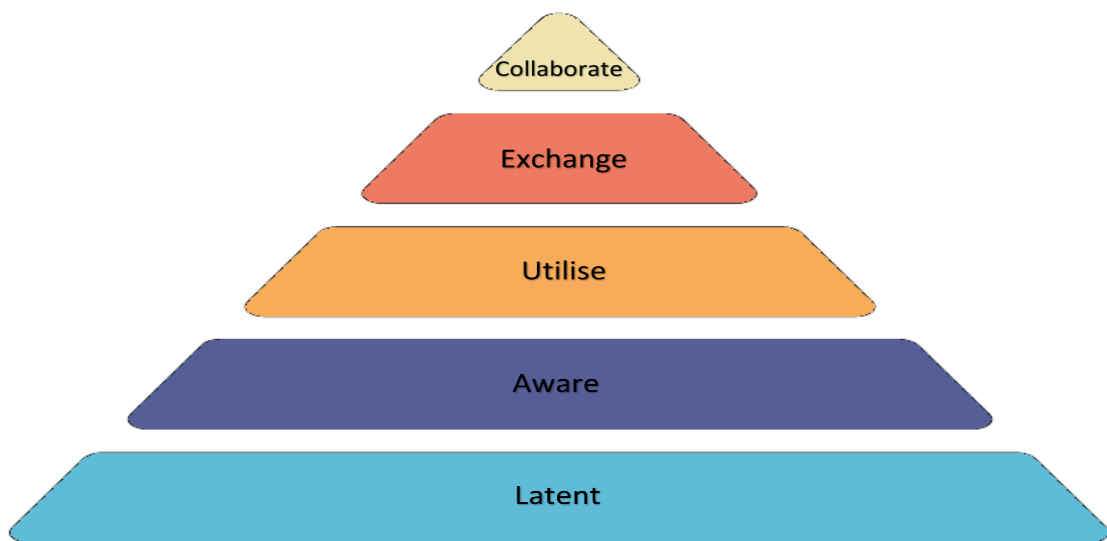


**IT and Technology team:** The Technology Team (jointly with the Communication Team) provides *qualitative* evidence, and *quantitative* measures, of use of NCRM's online resources. Drawing on user comments (for example on YouTube presentations) the team identifies how NCRM stakeholders are applying NCRM resources and training on methods to their research. The IT team produces impact surveys, in dialogue with other NCRM workstreams; and manages online evaluation.

**Communication team:** Using the NCRM newsletter and social media, the communication team has the ear of many NCRM stakeholders and thus can:

- ask stakeholders for their success and impact stories/case-studies
- celebrate and highlight success stories in NCRM newsletters and social media
- ***amplify*** *success* through the use of newsletters and social media, and beyond (for example, by communicating with and through other organisations in the training and methods communities and beyond)
- communicate NCRM's ongoing sustainability / sustainable growth plans
- work with the engagement team on building NCRM's reputation

**Centre manager and TCB co-ordinators:** The Centre Manager and TCB co-ordinators represent the front line for information gathering from NCRM's stakeholders and participants of its various activities, *encouraging completion of evaluation form and impact surveys.*

# 8. Conclusions

## 8.1 Summary:

In its previous funding phases, NCRM was funded to undertake TCB activities, and research-related methods. The latter provided strong impacts for our organisation. However, since 2020, in-line with ESRC funding priorities and decisions, we have shifted our focus, and our primary purpose has been to advance methodological practice in the social sciences and beyond, with a focus on TCB. This has changed some of the ways in which we define, generate and evidence impact.

Focusing on our engagement and TCB activities, this Impact Strategy document has:

- outlined how we define impact
- examined the assumptions and hypotheses (summarised in Appendix 1) that underpin our projected pathways to impact, and our impact aims and goals
- summarised our impact aims and goals, and the type of impacts that we aim to generate
- identified what we have been doing, and are currently doing, to generate, evidence, and showcase impact
- outlined some of the facilitators and barriers to generating, evidencing and showcasing impact (emphasising the importance of quality assurance in the impact generation process; and the difficulties involved in using quantitative measures at scale to provide evidence of impact)
- described the interconnectedness of our workstreams in generating, evidencing and showcasing impact
- emphasised the iterative nature of our impact generation

## 8.2 Future plans for evidencing, showcasing, amplifying and maximising NCRM impact

We have been working with our different workstreams to identify different ways to evidence, showcase, amplify and maximise our impact. This work will be reflected in the *NCRM Impact Action Plan 2023-2024*.

Key issues that will be incorporated within this plan will be:

- the consideration of key facilitators and barriers (identified in this strategy) to generating, evidencing, showcasing, amplifying and maximising our impact; this will include ensuring quality during delivery of our events, resources and activities; ensuring that beneficiaries who are key contributors in providing evidence of impact, fully understand how impact is defined, generated and evidenced; and encouraging new, creative and innovative methods for evidencing and showcasing impact
- the identification of the types of impact that we can create
- strategies to maximise the likelihood that we achieve these impacts
- strategies to evidence the impacts that are generated

- strategies to evidence the impacts that we, and our beneficiaries generate
- reviewing some of our current methods of evidencing impact
- ensuring that impact remains foregrounded in our policy and that our workstreams continue to work together, iteratively, to evidence, showcase and maximise impact
- to continue to connect with our stakeholders, and build connections across the methods landscape, to amplify our impact successes

# Abbreviations

| | |
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| CRP | Changing Research Practices Project |
| DR-TN | Data Resources Training Network |
| DTP-TN | Doctoral Training Partnership Training Network |
| ESRC | Economic and Social Research Council |
| HE | Higher Education |
| ISER | Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex |
| KE | Knowledge Exchange |
| MiSoC | ESRC Centre on Micro-Social Change, University of Essex |
| NCRM | ESRC National Centre for Research Methods |
| PGR | Post graduate research student |
| SDC-Net | Survey Data Collection Network |
| TCB | Training and Capacity Building |
| UKDS | United Kingdom Data Service |
| UKRI | UK Research and Innovation (and councils) |
| WISERD | Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research and Data |

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# Appendix 1

## Summary of hypotheses

**Hypothesis 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.

**Hypothesis 2:**   Participants who have engaged with NCRM training and resources will apply their new learning and skills to their research and/or teaching.

**Hypothesis 3:**   Some participants who engage with NCRM training and resources will develop networks and collaborations during and after taking part.

**Hypothesis 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.

**Hypothesis 5**:   NCRM knowledge exchange events will enable the development of networks and communities of practice.

**Hypothesis 6:**   Some NCRM beneficiaries will engage in multiplier capacity building.

**Hypothesis 7:**   Some NCRM beneficiaries may go on to gain or change their jobs, or their job roles.

**Hypothesis 8:**   Some NCRM beneficiaries will apply their new or improved skills in research that goes on to provide economic, societal, policy and cultural benefits

**Hypothesis 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

**Hypothesis 10:**   The interconnectedness of NCRM's workstreams will make NCRM more than the sum of its parts as an infrastructure organisation

**Hypothesis 11:**   NCRM will continue to develop into more than the sum of its parts enabling it to benefit the methods landscape

**Hypothesis 12:**   NCRM will gradually build its (financial) capacity and sustainability

**Hypothesis 13:**   NCRM will generate unanticipated impacts

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