

# TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR RESEARCH IMPACT

The **Matter  
of Focus**



Research Impact School

- Four engaging live online workshops
- Three-month trial of OutNav - our impact tracking software
- One-to-one follow-up session
- Research impact showcase event

APRIL/MAY 2022

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

01

Is your research making an impact?

02

Understanding and assessing research impact - a practical and meaningful approach

06

Top tips for assessing research impact

07

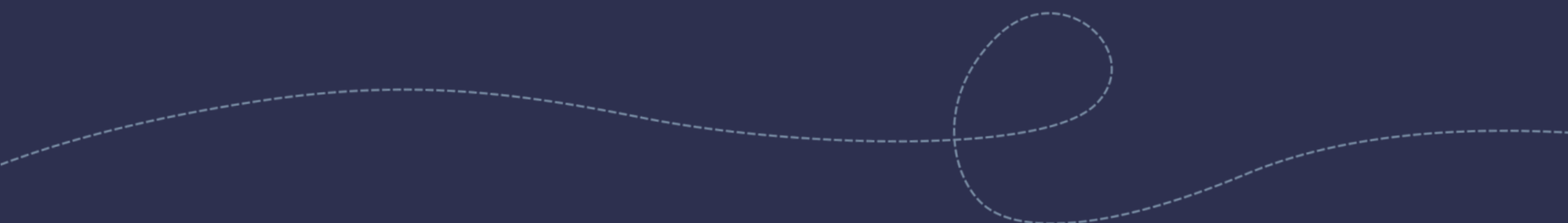
The Matter of Focus Research Impact School training programme

09

Introducing OutNav

10

Feedback about The Matter of Focus Research Impact School



# IS YOUR RESEARCH MAKING AN IMPACT?

Are you worrying about how to answer that question?

No one wants to do research that goes unused. As researchers, we aspire to making a contribution, however small, to enriching our world with evidence and insight. On top of this is the growing pressure to demonstrate that your research has made an impact in some way.

But it can be hard to unpick the impacts that research has had, and even more challenging to demonstrate those impacts with robust evidence.

**If you're struggling to tell the story of how your research project, programme or centre is making a difference, you have come to the right place.**

The Matter of Focus Research Impact School booklet will help you take control of your research impact!



Over a series of four 2-hour, live and engaging workshops, I will take you through my evidence-based approach to understanding and assessing research impact.

You will find it a practical and meaningful approach that will help you unpick how research impact happens, and build a framework for ongoing impact tracking – all held together in one place using our secure, cloud-based software OutNav.

This booklet outlines:

- my approach to understanding and assessing research impact
- what you will learn and gain by joining me on my Research Impact School training programme
- how OutNav will support you with ongoing research impact tracking.

If you would like to have chat about whether this training with software programme is right for you, please get in touch with me at [sarah@matter-of-focus.com](mailto:sarah@matter-of-focus.com)

I look forward to hearing about your work!

**Dr Sarah Morton**

Co-founder / Director Matter of Focus  
Honorary Fellow The University of Edinburgh

# UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING RESEARCH IMPACT

I developed my approach to understanding and assessing research impact through my mid-life PhD and have since used it in seven independent impact studies, in advising several research programmes, and in supporting academics to write impact case studies.

## AN EVIDENCE-INFORMED APPROACH

When I set out studying for a PhD in 2008, little did I know that my topic – research impact assessment – was about to take off in the UK and around the world as more interest became focused on the need to understand the wider benefits of research to society and economy. I was fortunate to gain insights into this by studying a successful research partnership, and building a framework based on contribution analysis.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Morton, S. (2015). Progressing research impact assessment: A 'contributions' approach Research Evaluation. 2015 October 1, 2015;24(4):405-19.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvv016>

## DEFINING RESEARCH IMPACT

Definitions are important in a PhD, so I developed one that has been useful to many colleagues grappling with how research and knowledge exchange activities contribute to high level outcomes like improved well-being.

My definition separates research impact into three distinct levels:

- **Research uptake:** research users have engaged with research: they have read a briefing, attended a conference or seminar, were research partners, were involved in advising and shaping the research project in some way, or engaged in some other kind of activity which means they know the research exists.
- **Research use:** research users act upon research, discuss it, pass it on to others, adapt it to context, present findings, use it to inform policy, or practice developments.
- **Research impact:** changes in awareness, knowledge and understanding, ideas, attitudes and perceptions, and policy and practice as a result of research.

The challenge then is to trace impact through these levels, and find the evidence to demonstrate that change has occurred and can be reasonably linked to research.

This definition is based on the conceptualization of research use as a complex process, and follows work by Weiss<sup>2</sup>, and Gabay & LeMay<sup>3</sup> who have unpicked the processes of research use in policy and practice to show that it is not a linear process. People who use research are not passive recipients of knowledge, instead they take up and use research according to the complex needs of the situation they are in, and combine it with other forms of knowledge to support their policy or practice. This presents many challenges for those of us who want to understand impact.

<sup>2</sup> Weiss, C., H (1979). The many meanings of research utilisation. Public Administration Review 39(5): 426-431.

<sup>3</sup> Gabbay, J. and A. le May (2004). Evidence based guidelines or collectively constructed mindlines? Ethnographic study of knowledge management in primary care. BMJ 329. <https://www.bmj.com/content/329/7473/1013>



[THIS APPROACH] HAS BEEN REALLY HELPFUL TO TALK ABOUT  
IMPACT, EVEN WHEN IMPACT FEELS REALLY NEBULOUS."  
[course feedback given anonymously]

## HOW TO ASSESS RESEARCH IMPACT

I advocate setting out a theory of change to show how research has contributed to different levels of outcomes.

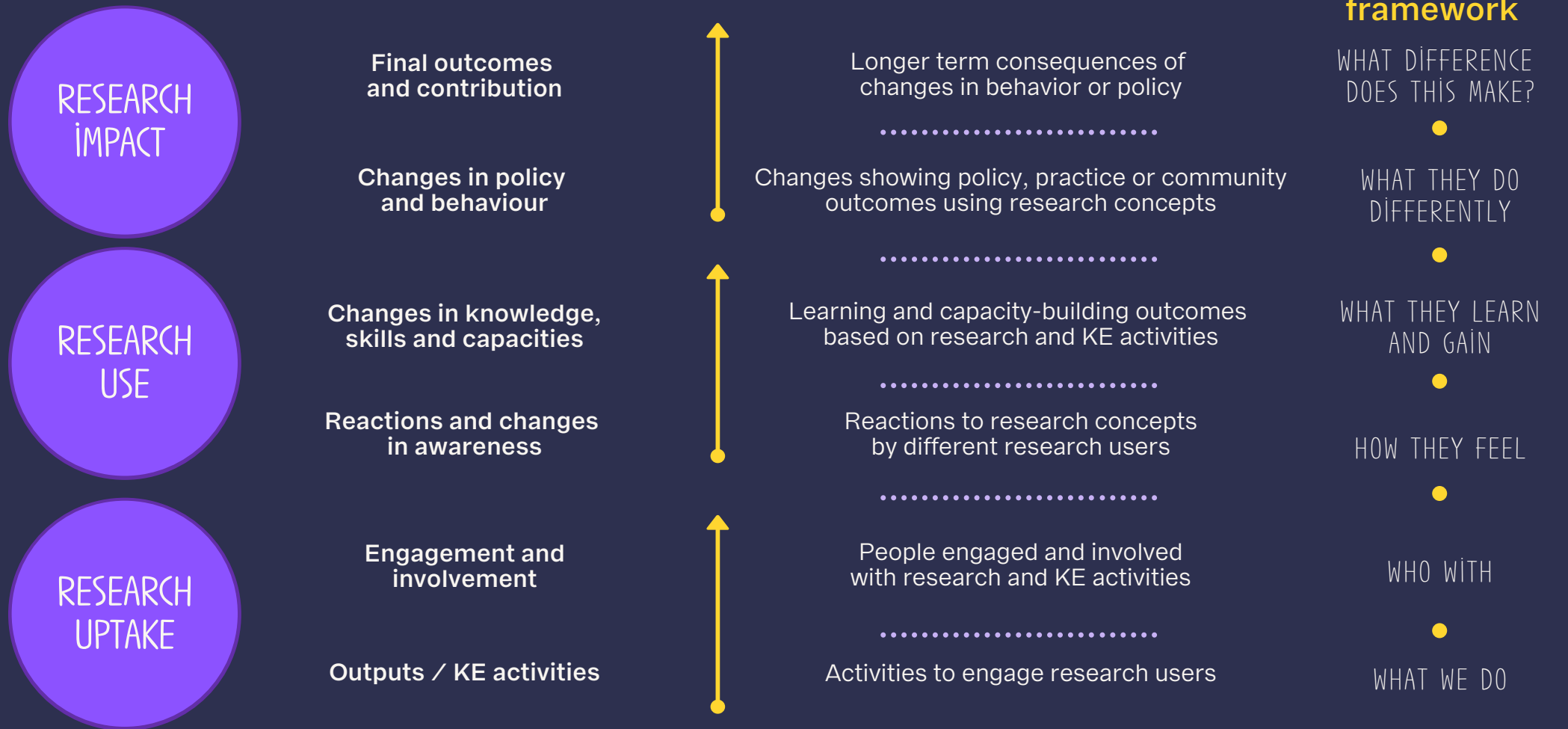
At Matter of Focus, we refer to this as an impact or outcome map – see our post Understand the outcomes and impacts that matter for more on this: <https://bit.ly/3lqds1B>

Theories of change are dynamic – they can be used as a planning tool for knowledge exchange, as well as the framework for assessing impact.

The Research Contribution Framework (see page 04) published in Research Evaluation shows how to use a theory of change approach to understanding and demonstrating the impact of your research. This method of understanding impact aligns well with the case study approach used by many research excellence frameworks, such as the REF UK.



## Research Contribution Framework



Having set out your theory of change, a variety of data and evidence can then be assembled against it.

At Matter of Focus, we use an impact map to help us clarify and clearly articulate the contribution story of our research. The right-hand column above shows how the Matter of Focus impact map framework aligns with the Research Contribution Framework.

Our software OutNav brings this approach to life as a way of planning for and assessing research impact. See page 09 for more.

“SYSTEMATIC FLEXIBILITY! THAT’S WHAT I LOVE ABOUT THIS [APPROACH] – IT APPRECIATES THE MESSINESS BUT IT REALLY PULLS ME IN AND PROVIDES STRUCTURE.”  
[course feedback given anonymously]

## WORKING WITH RISKS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Working collaboratively is particularly helpful for identifying any assumptions we've made about how impact might occur. We advise spending time interrogating these assumptions and naming any risks that your intended impact might not occur. These discussions form the basis for assembling and analysing data.

During the Research Impact School training, I will share a list of common risks and assumptions for research impact, drawn from the literature.

You will then start to build your own list of risks and assumptions in OutNav, so that you can reflect on the implications they will have for analysis of your progress, and ensure that you collect data and feedback to be able to monitor this.

## DATA FOR RESEARCH IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The activities in the Research Impact School workshops will help you shape the data, evidence and feedback you need for research impact assessment.



THIS APPROACH IS REALLY USEFUL FOR TELLING THE IMPACT NARRATIVE... I'VE REALISED WE HAVE NOT BEEN TELLING THE RIGHT STORY OF OUR IMPACT. I'M AN ACADEMIC, AND I AM NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND WHAT WE'VE BEEN SAYING, SO WHAT HOPE DOES ANYONE ELSE HAVE!"  
[course feedback given anonymously]



I NOW HAVE THE ABILITY TO ACTUALLY DESCRIBE WHAT I'VE BEEN DOING FOR THE LAST EIGHT YEARS, IN A COMPREHENSIVE WAY."  
[course feedback given anonymously]



Mapping the contribution of the Global Kids Online programme – the assessment of this can be found on the Unicef Office of Research-Innocenti website: <https://bit.ly/3A0nRFe>

# TOP TIPS FOR ASSESSING RESEARCH IMPACT



PREVIOUSLY RESEARCH IMPACT JUST FELT A BIT TOO DIFFICULT TO MEASURE – SO I DIDN'T! OR AT LEAST I WAS LOOKING FOR EVIDENCE LIKE 'WE'VE SAVED THE GOVERNMENT THIS MUCH MONEY' – AND IF WE DIDN'T HAVE THAT SORT OF EVIDENCE, THEN I THOUGHT WE COULDN'T SHOW THAT WE'D HAD IMPACT."

[course feedback given anonymously]

## 1. BE A DETECTIVE

Assessing the impact of research can be a bit like being a detective. I often think of it as a detective job – finding clues and following them up. Sometimes one research user has a rich story to tell of how they have used research to influence policy or practice. I discuss this in a paper published in Evidence & Policy.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. COLLECT AS YOU GO

It really helps if you collect data and feedback as you go, rather than waiting until time has passed and trying to fill the gaps. Ideally if you have set out theory of change or impact map, then you will be able to see what feedback will be needed to evidence your contribution. I would advocate for using every interaction with research users as an opportunity to collect feedback, preferably formal feedback, but observations and reflections if that's not possible.

## 3. YOU DON'T NEED LOTS OF DATA - JUST THE RIGHT DATA

You don't need lots of data of impact, just enough convincing and well analysed data to demonstrate your contribution. Often a few key research users or collaborators can give rich insights that you can follow up and, if looking for policy change, can help shape any documentary analysis that is needed.

## 4. IT TAKES TIME FOR IMPACT, AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Impact takes time to emerge, so just stick with it, collecting data as you go. It can be useful to ask people if you can follow up with them after six months or a year to track emerging impacts.

<sup>4</sup> Morton, S. (2015). Creating research impact: the roles of research users in interactive research mobilisation. Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice, Volume 11, Number 1, January 2015, pp. 35-55(21) <https://doi.org/10.1332/174426514X13976529631798>



# TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR RESEARCH IMPACT WITH OUR TRAINING & OUTNAV

The Matter of Focus Research Impact School training is a remote programme that takes place live on Zoom, using Miro and our own software OutNav.

The programme includes:

- Four, live 2-hour workshops, spread across three weeks\*.
- Resources for tracking your research or knowledge to action initiative's impact.
- Continued use of OutNav for three months after the course, so you can carry on tracking.
- Ongoing help and support for the duration of your OutNav trial via our twice-weekly drop in help sessions.
- A one-to-one follow-up session a four weeks after the workshops.
- The opportunity to share your work-in-progress with invited colleagues and stakeholders in a showcase event.

## WHAT YOU WILL LEARN AND GAIN

- An understanding of the challenges of tracking the impact of research on communities, policy, practice or the public.
- A measurable impact plan, with identified data and feedback.
- Strategies for getting feedback that ensure your research impact assessment is robust and credible.
- Experience of OutNav, and how this cloud-based software tool can hold your research impact framework and pull together all your evidence in one place.
- Ongoing help and support via membership of our OutNav Community for the duration of your OutNav trial.

## WHAT DIFFERENCE THIS WILL MAKE

By the end of the course you will have a pathway to impact for your chosen project, with defined data and evidence, and an emerging impact narrative. You will also have a better understanding of how to track the impact of research and will be able to take the learning and apply it to other projects.

\*For scheduled dates in April/May 2022, please see [www.matter-of-focus.com/research-impact-school-training](http://www.matter-of-focus.com/research-impact-school-training).

## WHAT WE WILL COVER

- How to plot impact maps
- Using impact maps to assess impact
- Assessing impact – potential indicators (what works)
- Identifying data (and gaps) and designing data collection
- Building your impact story
- Telling your impact story for different audiences, including REF and RCA impact case study requirements.

In the workshops we will explore how to set out your impact map and use this as a lens for collecting and collating data that can demonstrate that your research or K2A strategy makes a difference.

The workshops will take you through a process of setting out the impact for your project or programme, auditing your data, improving feedback and pulling everything together into an impact narrative, case study or other report.

## WHAT YOU WILL WORK ON

You will need to focus on a specific project, programme or research portfolio. This will be easiest if you choose something well-defined, with existing impact goals. If you want to discuss this prior to the course, please get in touch:

[sarah@matter-of-focus.com](mailto:sarah@matter-of-focus.com)

## SHOWCASE EVENT

A few weeks after the training ends, you will have an opportunity to share your work with people inside your organisation and other stakeholders that you would like to invite. This is also an opportunity to find out how others are progressing and celebrate your first steps on the road to impact tracking.

## WORKSHOP ONE

Approaches to assessing research impact & introduction to pathways. We will review different approaches to thinking about research impact. You will spend time thinking and defining what your own project's specific contribution might be.

## WORKSHOP TWO

Define and refine a pathway to impact. Building on common research impact, knowledge mobilisation or evidence to impact strategies, you will start to explore and define what your own pathway to impact should look like.

## WORKSHOP THREE

Data for impact assessment - sources and approaches. We will review common approaches to impact assessment and consider what you already have that will help tell your impact story.

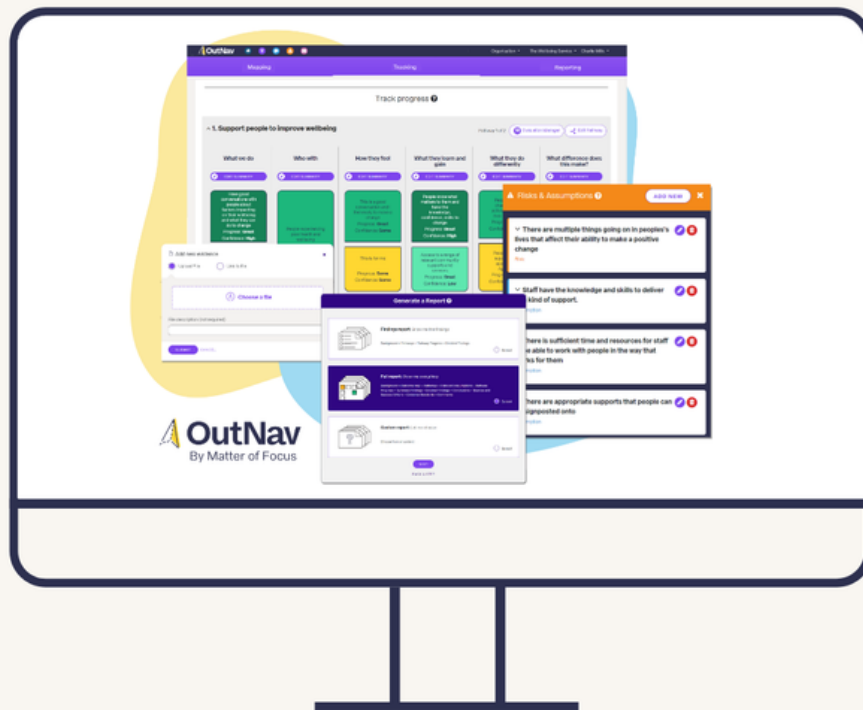
## WORKSHOP FOUR

Indicators and data for impact. Building on week three, we further interrogate what data is needed for your impact assessment, and what indicators and methods might help you build up your evidence.

We will then consider how to take this forward to tell an evidence-based impact story for funders and stakeholders. We'll look at what makes a good impact story or case study, and how you can work towards improving, building and refining your own.

# INTRODUCING OUTNAV

A single place in the cloud to pull together  
and track your research impact.



OutNav is a cloud-based tool we've developed at Matter of Focus to hold our approach to understanding and tracking impact. It puts the capability into your hands to understand the impact your research is making.

OutNav helps you map out a pathway to impact and then use that pathway as a lens through which you can think about the data and evidence you need to demonstrate your impact and pull it all into one place. This gives you one single source of all the data and evidence that's going to show what impact you're having.

You can also report straight from OutNav at the click of a button, as a way of demonstrating your impact for REF purposes, for funders, for stakeholders, or within your team for ongoing learning and improvement. You can share on screen interactive reports directly from OutNav – both privately and publicly, or you can download into other formats that you might need to report in.

We start to use OutNav in week two of the Research Impact School and you may continue using the tool to track your impact after the training for three months. At no additional cost, you will be able to invite other people to join your OutNav project; perhaps people you want to contribute data or evidence, or collaborate with on impact assessment.

Your three-month trial includes ongoing help and support through the tool and via our twice-weekly drop-in helps sessions, available for everyone in your OutNav team.

At the end of the three months, you can download all your work or continue with a paid OutNav subscription.



# FEEDBACK ABOUT THE COURSE

Anonymous post-course feedback from members of our 2020 and 2021 cohorts.

“ The content within this course should be essential learning for any researcher. It has changed the way I think about the research process, given me invaluable resources that I'll draw upon in the future, and I've made some great connections.

“ Extremely practical lessons and processes.

“ Embrace the messiness. This is structured messiness, which is really helpful. It will help my colleagues think about impact too.

“ Sign up! [the course] offers an opportunity to engage with others internationally and to offer new and creative insights into research impact, and time to reflect and reevaluate what you are currently doing.

“ ...having OutNav to map all of it in one place is really helpful because in our organisation different people do different parts of the work and until now there hasn't been any coordination.

“ We could apply this approach to any of our projects and be able to say something, which is really positive for the rest of the team.

“ This is a very comprehensive approach. You can focus and work on certain small pieces knowing that all the mass of things still to do is being held for you.

“ Do it! You will learn something useful and it will change your understanding of research impact.

## WHO YOU WILL LEARN WITH

We have welcomed people from across the UK, Canada, Italy and Australia to the Research Impact School.

Participants have included people from knowledge exchange, policy and public engagement offices, as well as academics working on individual projects and leading research teams.

We keep the numbers low on this training course, to ensure that the live workshops are engaging for everyone. You will get to know your course colleagues well, learning from each other as well as from me!



## MY BACKGROUND

Over the last 15 years I have developed an international reputation as a leader in the fields of knowledge exchange and research impact, leading in-demand courses such as Making and Measuring Impact for NCRM, and have been an invited speaker on this topic in the UK, Canada and Australia. I have conducted seven independent impact studies and supported organisations and individuals to create and understand the impact of research and evidence-use strategies.

## COURSE FEES

A place at the Matter of Focus Research Impact School costs £500 +VAT per person.

## HOW TO BOOK

You can book your place online at:

[www.matter-of-focus.com/research-impact-school-training](http://www.matter-of-focus.com/research-impact-school-training)

Following receipt of your booking form, we will send an invoice to you or your nominated finance contact. Bank transfer and credit card options are available.

In 2017, I left my permanent role at the University of Edinburgh (where I remain an Honorary Fellow) to set up Matter of Focus with co-founder Dr Ailsa Cook. Together we have combined our expertise and developed OutNav to support public service initiatives with our approach to understanding and assessing outcomes and impact.

If you would like to get in touch, please do so at [sarah@matter-of-focus.com](mailto:sarah@matter-of-focus.com)

I'm always happy to talk about research impact!

The **Matter  
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