Social Science Research Park
Y Parc Ymchwil Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol

The Future of Social Science Research: NCRM MethodsCon 2024

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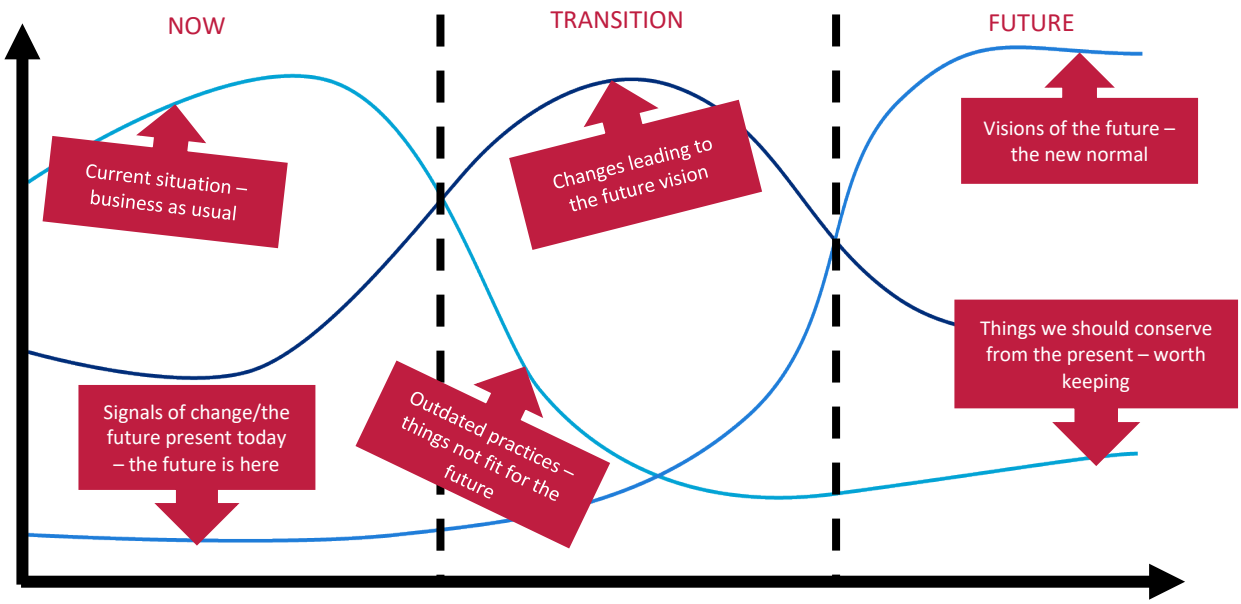
1. Most important issues currently facing social science research

- **Research Agility** - adaptable structures and incentives are necessary for flexible research designs and partnerships with society. A more creative approach could foster agility in responding to societal needs.
- **Future Security** - precarious academic job structures challenge researchers. There's a need to ensure high-quality research without constant pressure and "firefighting" against instability.
- **Data Utilisation** - the effective use of data is essential, especially with growing complexity and technological changes.
- **Speed of Research Iteration** - research must keep pace with rapid societal changes. Challenges arise when ideas become obsolete before solutions are developed.
- **Diversity of Methods**: Concern that funding preferences favour qualitative research. Ensuring a balance between qualitative and quantitative approaches, but beyond researchers' control and falls to funders.
- **University-Practitioner Partnerships**: Collaborations that bridge theory and practice, encouraging a diversity of methods in research.
- **Researchers are People not Resources**: Balancing professional and personal life is difficult due to the precarious nature of academic careers – sense this isn't easily solvable.

- **Interdisciplinarity in Practice**: While interdisciplinarity is valued, implementing it presents practical challenges. Investigating how to effectively conduct interdisciplinary research is a research topic in itself.
- **Maintaining Specialisations and Expertise**: Concern that social science expertise may be diluted as broader interdisciplinary approaches are pursued.
- **Effective Participation**: Ensuring active and meaningful participation in social science research remains a key issue.
- **Micro and Macro Connections**: How small-scale issues connect to larger social and ecological challenges.
- **Research Complexity**: The world is becoming increasingly complex, making it harder to conduct meaningful social science research. Navigating complexity is a growing challenge.
- **Attitudes to Risk**: Long-term research versus short-term projects reflect differing attitudes to funding and future planning.
- **Breaking Down Silos**: Encouraging interdisciplinarity and removing institutional and disciplinary constraints is vital for collaboration. (but NB importance of maintaining expertise and specialisation)
- **Big Qualitative Data**: Qualitative research needs to keep up with big quantitative data. Tools to diversify and expand qualitative data collection – e.g. apps
- **Collaboration and Humility**: Interdisciplinary collaboration requires philosophical, ethical, and methodological humility, and adaptability across disciplines.
- **Funding**: Securing sustainable funding for social science research is a persistent challenge.
- **IT, Inequality, and Access**: Addressing how technology intersects with inequity is crucial to ensure all groups have access to resources and opportunities.
- **Future Core Skills**: As technology evolves, the core skills for the workforce will shift, and social science must anticipate and respond to these changes.
- **Evidence for Policy and Practice**: The need for social science research to effectively inform policy and practice remains a critical issue.
- **Technological and Generational Change**: Rapid advancements in technology and shifts in generational perspectives require constant adaptation in research approaches.

This summary list highlights the breadth and depth of issues currently facing social science research

2. Three Horizons Mapping Responses



NCRM MethodsCon participants mapped the future of social science research using the Three Horizon framework. This is a summary of that mapping exercise.

Current situation: business as usual

- Not enough funding
    - Constrains interdisciplinary working
- Fragmented research
- Lack of interdisciplinarity
- Too focused on cultural and ideological transformation rather than material transformation
- Too individualistic and competitive
- Too led by academic interests
- Evolving too fast
- Using diverse sets of data: facing opportunities and challenges
- Highly distributed and not well connected
- Bureaucratic and inefficient
- Too siloed by discipline, subject, method, approach, etc
- Too focused on academic outputs – which are tied to traditional academic career progression
- Hierarchy of knowledges
- Amazing datasets available
    - but not enough research using them – links to availability of IT and skills
    - difficulties in accessing data
- Short-termism
    - Too focussed on most pressing issues
    - Reactive rather than creative

    - responding to problems rather than creating new realities
    - applying concepts to discrete problems with limited horizon
- Precarity of researcher employment
    - Precarious contracts
    - Not good employment prospects in the social sciences
- The wrong kind of incentives
    - Diverse incentives created fragmented research
- Risk averse
- Poor environments for discussion and debate
- Insufficient high quality social science in interdisciplinary research (e.g. technology and its impact)
- Ill-equipped to answer questions about the future
- Pessimism
- Less space to think innovatively about how to approach research
- Government social research heavily focused on 'what works'
- Slow and not always aligned to policy/political cycles
- Pockets of knowledge
- Disconnected
- Disagreement over what is important and why
- Social sciences are very self-aware of its position, ability and limitations, in ways that other fields and disciplines are not
    - Focused on equality, diversity, criticality and reflective practice
- Attempts to address complexity and interdisciplinary working, but limited by barriers (e.g. departmental, expertise)
- Collecting too many data without knowing how to use it
- Impact planning at the end of the research (instead of at the beginning)
- Divided about use of technology (AI) in social science research
- Limited dialogue between qualitative and quantitative research
- Social sciences are less valued than other sciences, because they don't produce solutions and data
- Tokenistic
- Economics still dominates the social sciences despite its failure
- Largely a qualitative discipline
- On-demand research and loss of independence from policy-makers (contractual research?)
- Marginal role in social and ecological transformations in public space – STEM still privileged
- Turning research into tangible changes in policy/programmes

Signals of change: the future is here

- Positive signals
    - Collaborative funding calls (but concern about sufficient funding for larger number of partners)
    - International collaboration – with different backgrounds and expertise
    - Increasing measurement and research on wellbeing (e.g. emergence of economics of happiness)

    - Professors of Practice
    - Research institutes that promote interdisciplinarity (e.g. the Productivity Institute)
    - Greater focus on impact, outreach and public engagement: signals key role for social science
        - Increasing public and institutional interest in social and environmental issues and seeking solutions (e.g. migration, housing, feminism)
        - Increasing public consultation/involvement in research projects
        - Society has more understanding and is more informed for their data and the research outputs
        - Funding for multidisciplinary centres are embedded in communities working with and for communities
        - Growth in universities' civic responsibilities
        - Greater awareness of fairness
    - Increasing push/desire for better work/life balance
    - Events (like this) encouraging discussion and collaboration
    - Conducting policy evaluation which are then taken on by governments in tangible ways
    - Using AI as an innovative research tool – enhancing 'out of box' thinking
    - Academics seeking multidisciplinary teams and collaboration
        - Funder ambition for cross-disciplinary funding
        - Social sciences increasingly mandatory in other research council's funding (e.g.EPSRC and BBRSC)
        - Increasing inclusion of social scientific qualitative research in interdisciplinary research
        - Research groups with common interests allows 'some' interdisciplinary work
    - Desire for more long-term funding scenarios
    - Funding themed challenges (but still going to usual suspects for expertise)
    - Funding for new forms of data, skills and training (qualitative and quantitative)
        - New datasets: e.g. Our Future Health
        - Seed funding for data infrastructure
        - Increasing quantitative social science training
- Negative signals
    - Researcher job satisfaction is declining
    - More time being spent on administrative tasks than undertaking research
- Other signals
    - Use of expertise in the absence of 'science' or empirical findings
    - Availability and use of AI: e.g. as research assistant
    - New generation of social science researchers less oriented by ideology, more sceptical and more proactive

Changes leading to the future vision

- Student activism
- Slow career tracks
- Let research be guided by

- Learn from other sectors
- Diversity of/in leadership – demographic and intellectual breadth
- The social science that can really help create the new world that everyone fits in
- Cross-culture/background research
- Academics reshaping our own incentive structures
- Government decides to fund HE and research sustainably
- Use Net Promoter Scores for universities? [these are a form of loyalty measures]
- Funders priorities a vast reduction in administration (e.g. grant submission length and time to review)
- Fix student fees
- Integration of AI in teaching and training of researchers
- Increase of social conflict and social scientists are involved in
- Funders track researcher wellbeing and set up transparent system improvement/change process
- Social science parks
- Redistribution of power in academic systems
- Public-academic-private research groups and collaboration – ideally salaried
- Allow protests
- Collective action/solidarity
- National Centre for Research Methods
- Opportunities for face-to-face events and interactions
- Use of technological instruments, such as AI, for researchers
- More flexible and iterative approach to research
- Interdisciplinary workshops
- Invest in digital equality
- More opportunities for young researchers
- More co-disciplinary teaching and learning
- EDI reflections and actions: true implementation in particularly in the representation of women
- Permanent contracts to early career researchers and academics
- Government building better relationships and opportunities for collaboration with social researchers, and vice versa
- Increased funding for researcher training and more training available
- Invite the third sector into conversations earlier
- Invest in appropriate technology
- Increased data understanding
- Work culture: use tools for efficiency to have a better work-life balance in our careers
- More support for activities that break down barriers between research and practice/policy
- Promotion recognises contribution to social science and research community
- Be more innovative in qualitative data collection: hard but worth it?
- More technical skills within discipline
- Encourage ‘problems-focused’ research
- Collaboration with interdisciplinary experts both in natural science and social science
- More longer term longitudinal funding (particularly involving mixed methods)

- Fund long-term projects across disciplines and sectors
- Design research and teams that have specialist and interdisciplinary and general knowledge
- More risk-taking by funders to allow disciplines to come together and work through 'big problems' together
- Joint posts and sabbaticals across public institutions
- Implement existing policies (e.g. data policy)

Outdated practices

- Publication driven careers in research and social sciences
- Research Excellence Framework
- Hierarchical structures
- Academics overqualified for pastoral, planning or HR roles
- Lengthy bureaucracy
- grant submissions which take longer than three days to write, or one month to review
- Funder micromanagement and bureaucracy: trust researchers and embrace risks
- Rigid university structures
- Administrative roles that prevent focus on your research
- Excessive bureaucracy that is not justified within the whole research process
- Focussing too much on large scale problems and questions rather than solving smaller ones in sequence
- Fixed term contracts, precarity and no career progression
- Traditional report formats in communicating social research findings
- Terminology
- Red tape and bureaucracy as barriers to agile research
- Publishing in for-profit journals
- The created jargons and concepts that do not convey much meaning
- Solely undertaking siloed thinking
- Scientists coming to social scientists for input one day before a grant is submitted!
- Thinking that research application is an add-on
- Traditional approaches to literature reviews
- Entrenched and outdated views on problems which look at issues from only one perspective
- Lengthy research application cycles
- Writing grant proposals
- Current academic incentives (e.g. journal articles)
- Inaccessible and esoteric language
- Difficult, unintuitive systems (especially administrative ones)
- Remove administrative burden from academics' workloads
- Capitalism
- Loss or moral compass
- Peer review killing innovation
- Patient and public involvement tick boxes
- Funding that creates data silos
- Universities diverting money into assets

- Redundancy schemes
- Thinking of social science as something that is done only by academics and research consultants
- Jammed workloads with no flexibility
- Seeing one model for promotion – career progression needs to take account of 'futures' and the timescales and different creative paths
- Outdated mindsets to research
- Prioritising academic publications above all else
- Funding poor quality research with insufficient resources
- Putting unnecessary barriers in way of progressing research (e.g. how ethics approval can be more user friendly and efficiently processed)
- Vice chancellors and centralised university governance

Visions of the future: the new normal

- High quality free resources, training, data
- End of work precarity
- More funding
- Taking more risks – not driven by publications
- Time
- Ethics being discussed on a more regular basis
- Social sciences to be more confident of its value in research and for this to be conveyed to wider society
- Ethics and social consideration brough to other disciplines like engineering by default
- Rich birth cohort data of everyone in the world to make ultimate biosocial dataset
- Remove excessive barriers to access data (and more synthetic datasets)
- Social sciences are able to conduct their research faster because they have funds and independence (social and political)
- Investment in support to train in approaches
- Employment
- More organisations to join in big social research
- Informal/participatory conferences
- Encourage public audience dissemination
- Lots of money
- Collaboration withing and beyond disciplinary boundaries, and non-academic co-production
- Socialist utopia
- Wellbeing as the key focus of policy and how we choose to measure policy success
- More opportunities for funded/developing independent research (e.g. cooperatives) and collaborative studies (e.g. NGOs, private companies)
- Data is easy to find, access is straightforward, being embraced
- Researchers upskill through their career
- Long-term job design and security
- Social science as part of a multi-sectoral 'ecosystem' including other disciplines and sectors
- Methods which can support more rapid or timely answers to critical social issues

- Better willingness to fund social science research
- Collaborative and locally focused research
- Expertise is not equal to experience
- For research to be funded in networks of multiple disciplines around themes or shared outcomes
- Create suspension of disciplines and titles but not prior experiences
- Supportive of ideas, experiments and innovation as found in the sciences (e.g. computer science, biology and engineering)
- Innovation encouraged in policy research methods, moving away from 'gold standard' RCTs and considering more unique methods
- Embedded into the life and thought of cities, like open research Amsterdam
- Social science integrated with science
- Social science expertise underpins use of big data, not just for computer sciences and EPSRC
- Gives researchers job security
- More funds to participatory and creative research
- Interdisciplinarity
- Presence of technology in research
- Focused on studying/changing pressing issues
- Agile
- Less bureaucratic and more agile and efficient
- Focus on use, i.e. what does this mean for society, for practice
- Social sciences leading projects in science and engineering
- Meaningful patient and public involvement and engagement
- Full range of social science expertise embraced in ambitious interdisciplinary research
- Iteration between disciplines for better research that address complex issues
- Work life balance
- Public understanding and appreciation of why social science matters
- Money
- Diversity of 'models' not homogeny in methods, data, possible conclusions
- Democratised and less financially driven peer review system
- Robust, theoretically complex, interdisciplinary collaborations
- Critical use of technology
- More secure
- More agency to researchers
- Less publish or perish
- More diversified and globalised
- AI based/helped
- Deep thinking
- Big data driven
- Innovation

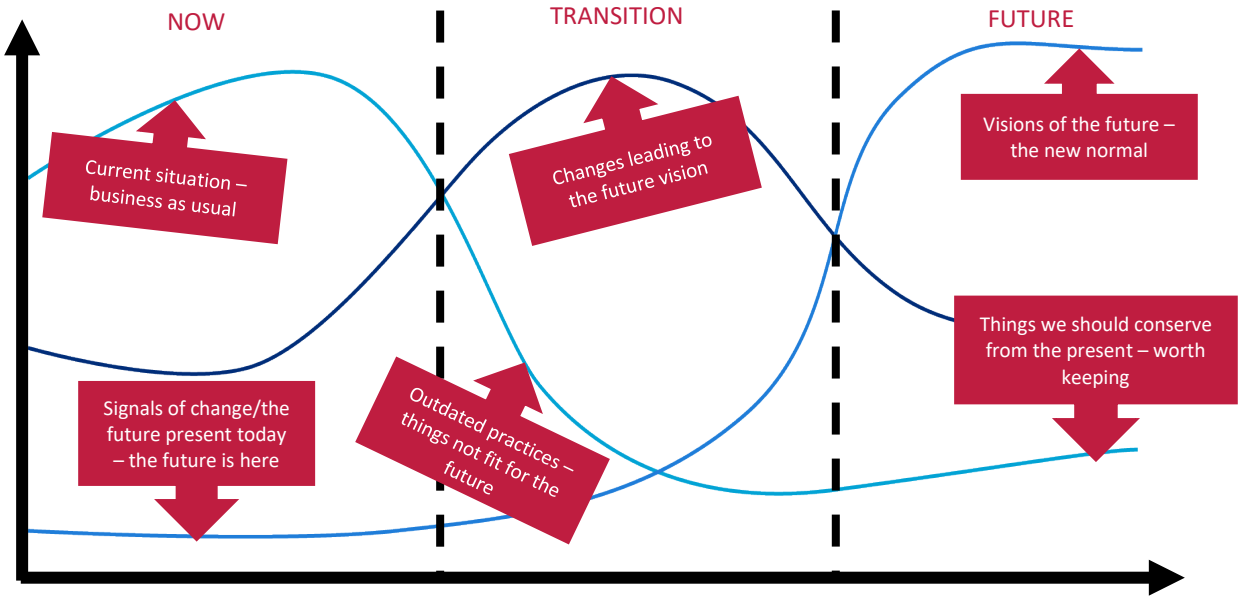
Things to keep from the present

- Increasing push (desire) for work/life balance

- Increasing inclusion of social scientific qualitative research in interdisciplinary research
- Increasing quantitative social science training
- This interdisciplinary conference encouraging discussions and collaboration
- Conducting policy evaluations which are then taken on by Governments in tangible ways
- Society has more understanding (and more informed) for their data and the research outputs using them now
- Funder ambition for cross-disciplinary funding
- Desire for long-term funding scenarios
- Fair awareness
- UKRI Interdisciplinary research pilot scheme
- Production and value of meta data
- Embedded research roles in delivery teams
- Creation of UK Evaluation Task Force
- Funding multidisciplinary centres that are embedded in communities working with and for communities
- Funding themed challenges
- International collaboration
- Increased focus on interdisciplinarity, its value and new funding schemes
- Funding going into new forms of data and skills training (qualitative and quantitative)
- Social sciences being mandatory in some science funding schemes
- Increase in mixed methods being funded
- Research groups with common interests allow some interdisciplinary work
- Complexity consistent research
- Lived experience participation
- Specialist knowledge and different approaches to problems
- Targeting the overall wellbeing
- Sense of innovation
- Incredible strength in depth in some social sciences
- Specialist skills and knowledge
- Concern about research design, inclusion and ethics
- Peer reviewed artucles
- Flexibility
- Disciplinarity
- Ethics and robust quality assessment of research and value
- The core interests of social science – society, people, structures, constraints, incentives
- Humans
- Communities of practice
- Data policies
- Teaching students
- In-person collaboration and working
- Key concern about human beings, wellness and health (physical and mental
  Change our life more better than ever

- Use of mixed methods to fully understand an issue, intervention or problem
- Data standards
- Flexibility in ways of working
- Flexible working

3. Summary of Three Horizons Mapping



Current situation: business as usual

- **Lack of Resources and Fragmentation**: Limited funding and fragmented research hinder interdisciplinary efforts.
- **Academic Focus**: Research is often too academic-centric, competitive, and driven by cultural transformations rather than practical changes.
- **Data and Technology**: While there are large datasets available, access and use of them are limited by skills, bureaucracy, and difficulties in connecting diverse data.
- **Bureaucratic Barriers**: Research is siloed by discipline, slow, bureaucratic, and often not aligned with policy needs.
- **Employment Precarity**: Researchers face precarious employment conditions with poor prospects, especially in social sciences.
- **Short-term Thinking**: Research is often reactive, focused on immediate problems, lacking innovation and long-term creative vision.
- **Incentive Issues**: Current incentives lead to risk-averse, fragmented, and overly competitive research environments.
- **Interdisciplinary Challenges**: Despite attempts, interdisciplinary research is limited due to institutional and departmental barriers.
- **Technological Hesitancy**: There is division on the role of AI and technology in social science research, with limited collaboration between qualitative and quantitative approaches.
- **Marginalized Role**: Social sciences are undervalued compared to other sciences like STEM, and have a limited impact on policy and public space transformations.
- **Impact**: Social sciences struggle to create tangible policy changes, are disconnected from political cycles, and face pessimism and isolation within the research community.

Signals of change: the future is here

Positive Signals

- **Collaborative Efforts**: Increased international collaboration and multidisciplinary research, including funding calls and partnerships across disciplines.
- **Wellbeing Focus**: Growing emphasis on wellbeing metrics, such as the "economics of happiness."
- **Interdisciplinary Institutions**: Institutes promoting interdisciplinarity (e.g., the Productivity Institute).
- **Impact and Engagement**: Greater focus on public engagement and societal issues, including environmental and social concerns.
- **Informed Public**: Society is becoming more informed and involved in research processes, with increased civic responsibilities for universities.
- **Work/Life Balance**: Rising demand for better work/life balance within academia.
- **AI as a Research Tool**: AI is being used to enhance research creativity.
- **Funding**: More funding is directed towards interdisciplinary research, new data infrastructure, and qualitative/quantitative training.

Negative Signals

- **Researcher Satisfaction**: Declining job satisfaction among researchers.
- **Administrative Burden**: Increasing time spent on administrative tasks instead of research.

Other Signals

- **AI as a Research Assistant**: Increased use of AI in research.
- **New Generation of Researchers**: The new generation is less ideology-driven, more sceptical, and proactive.

Changes leading to the future vision

- **Student activism** and social engagement shaping the future.
- **Career and research**: Calls for more flexible, sustainable funding and career tracks; reshaping incentive structures; increased collaboration across sectors.
- **Diversity and leadership**: Emphasis on diversity in leadership, including demographic and intellectual breadth.
- **AI and technology**: Integration of AI and technological tools in teaching, research, and data collection.
- **Collaboration and interdisciplinarity**: Advocates for cross-disciplinary research, collaboration between public and private sectors, and involvement of third-sector organizations.
- **Social impact**: Focus on social science's role in solving societal issues, encouraging problem-focused research, and breaking barriers between research and policy.
- **Workplace reforms**: Suggestions for permanent contracts, early career support, reducing administrative burdens, and improving work-life balance.
- **Innovative research approaches**: Increased risk-taking by funders, long-term interdisciplinary projects, and more opportunities for young researchers.

Outdated practices

- **Outdated Research Practices**: The academic system is hindered by outdated practices, including a heavy focus on publication-driven careers and rigid structures that prioritize hierarchical models over innovation.

- **Bureaucracy and Administrative Burden**: Lengthy bureaucratic processes, grant submission delays, and excessive administrative roles divert attention from research and create barriers to agile practices.
- **Lack of Flexibility and Career Progression**: Fixed-term contracts and a lack of career progression contribute to job insecurity, while rigid promotion models do not accommodate diverse career paths.
- **Inadequate Research Funding and Quality**: Funding practices often prioritize large-scale issues, leading to poorly resourced research and the creation of data silos.
- **Communication and Terminology Issues**: The use of esoteric language and traditional report formats hinders effective communication of social research findings.
- **Peer Review and Innovation Stifling**: Current peer review processes and academic incentives may stifle creativity and innovation in research.
- **Outdated Mindsets**: There is a need to move away from entrenched views and siloed thinking, encouraging collaboration and diverse perspectives in research.

Vision of the Future

- **Resource Accessibility**: High-quality free resources and training, with reduced barriers to data access and a focus on synthetic datasets.
- **Job Security & Funding**: End to work precarity, long-term job security, and increased funding for social science research, including independent and collaborative studies.
- **Research Agility**: More agile, less bureaucratic research practices that prioritize timely responses to social issues and support innovative methodologies.
- **Interdisciplinary Collaboration**: Emphasis on collaboration across disciplines, integrating social sciences with fields like engineering and health, fostering co-production with non-academic partners.
- **Ethics and Social Impact**: Regular discussions on ethics, a focus on wellbeing in policy measurement, and a commitment to societal impact.
- **Public Engagement**: Encouragement of public dissemination and meaningful involvement in research, enhancing societal understanding of social science value.
- **Innovation and Technology**: Adoption of AI and big data to support research, with a push for diverse methods and a less financially driven peer review system.
- **Empowerment of Researchers**: Greater agency for researchers, moving away from the "publish or perish" model, and promoting a supportive environment for creativity and deep thinking.
- **Global Perspective**: Embracing diversity in models and approaches, fostering a globalized perspective in social science research.

Things to keep from the present

Current Trends and Initiatives:

- Growing emphasis on work/life balance and flexible working arrangements.
- Increased incorporation of qualitative research within interdisciplinary studies.
- Expansion of quantitative social science training.
- Promotion of interdisciplinary conferences to foster collaboration.
- Implementation of policy evaluations that lead to tangible government actions.
- Enhanced public understanding of data and research outputs.

- Ambitious funding goals for cross-disciplinary projects and long-term funding scenarios.
- Initiatives like the UKRI Interdisciplinary Research Pilot and the UK Evaluation Task Force support collaborative efforts.

Research and Funding Focus:

- Emphasis on the production and value of metadata, embedded research roles, and community-based multidisciplinary centres.
- Prioritization of themed challenges and international collaboration in funding.
- Rising support for mixed methods research, inclusion of social sciences in funding schemes, and training for diverse data skills.
- Addressing complex societal issues through lived experience participation and specialist knowledge.

Core Values and Concerns:

- Focus on overall well-being, ethics, and robust quality assessments in research.
- Recognition of social sciences' core interests: society, people, structures, and incentives.
- Importance of communities of practice and effective data policies.
- Commitment to teaching and in-person collaboration to enhance student engagement and research outcomes.

Overall Aim:

- To leverage mixed methods and flexible approaches for a deeper understanding of issues, ultimately improving lives and fostering innovation in research.