



# **Evaluating in complex settings: Practical theory-based evaluation**

**Exercises for the Social Research Association – NERC course on 2nd February 2022**

**Course Tutor:**

**Prof. David Parsons ([drdj.parsons@gmail.com](mailto:drdj.parsons@gmail.com))**

## Practical Exercises

*These exercises give the opportunity to apply some of the course content. They are scenario-based and both exercises centre on the newly launched NERC-BBSRC 'Molecules to Landscapes' funding call. The outline of the programme (exercise 1) draws on actual programme content (adapted for the purposes of the course) but the use of a TBE based approach to evaluating the programme is hypothetical.*

*Exercises will be by group work using the Zoom breakout group function; no prior experience or preparation is needed for this. Each exercise will last for around 30 mins in total (each) to include feedback and discussion in a 'plenary' session at the end.*

- Exercise 1: Conjecturing 'assumptions' and 'expectations'
  
- Exercise 2: A stakeholder engagement and testing plan.

## Exercise 1: Conjecturing ‘assumptions’ and ‘expectations’ for an impact evaluation of ‘Molecules to landscapes’ programme

**Scenario:** A combination of disciplinary knowledge and approaches will be required to deliver a resilient, productive and sustainable environment to reverse biodiversity decline and reduce environmental impact. NERC and BBSRC together have announced (6 January 2022) the call for the *Molecules to Landscapes* programme research which aims to build research communities that cut across traditional disciplinary focuses to:

*“Foster collaborations and build capability across the NERC and BBSRC interface through support for interdisciplinary projects which bring together a range of disciplines<sup>1</sup> to contribute to and propose future research agenda’s to meet real world challenges for UK agriculture.”*

The programme will support 6-10 inter-disciplinary projects and collaborations which reflect the full diversity of stakeholders so these research communities will be better placed to define the key research questions, develop ideas and approaches, and build interdisciplinary capability to take advantage of future funding opportunities in this emerging area. The overall objectives of this initial programme are to support the development of:

- Collaborations to identify future research agendas for enhanced understanding and knowledge of molecular changes in innovations capable of scale up and implementation.
- Enhanced **capability, increase capacity and created communities** with the potential to contribute to future funding opportunities for longer-term, larger scale projects.
- **Foundations of a research base** to support future evidence-based work to inform strategy, regulation and skills needs in UK public policy.
- **New interdisciplinary expertise** to support knowledge exchange, translation, and commercialisation as necessary to facilitate innovation and knowledge impact.

The funding call has recently been announced for projects from eligible UK institutions of up to 12 months duration, commencing by 30 June 2022 with full economic cost (FEC) of up to £200,000. NERC-BBSRC will fund 80% of FEC. Proposals will nominated two co-PIs from different eligible disciplines. All applications will be expected to demonstrate anticipated short-term outcomes and longer-term potential for impacts on specific ecological challenges, agricultural and environmental improvements consistent with the programme goal.

**The evaluation:** An evaluation framework is being developed to assess cross-programme outcomes and impacts (across funded projects) and to inform future research priorities in this area. It will also provide lessons for a planned cross-Council review by UKRI for future interdisciplinary research community development reporting to ministers in December 2023. It is recognised that any longer-term impacts from *Molecules to Landscape* are likely to take time to develop, and will be affected by a complex policy and influencing environment. A

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<sup>1</sup> environmental engineering, ecology, agri-systems, molecular biology and data science.

theory of change is to be developed to provide a conceptual framework for the evaluation of programme effectiveness, outcomes and likely achievable impacts for innovative and practical solutions that could be developed further at landscape scale.

**The exercise:** As a preliminary to the call, UKRI and NERC working with stakeholders is to produce an initial working paper to set out early thinking on assumptions and expectations behind the call, and as an input to the theory of change which underpin the programme. The group exercise will set out 'bullet points' for each of 'assumptions' and 'expectations' as a starting point for a theory of change, and where:

- Expectations are defined as the anticipated measurable consequential changes (short and longer term) expected from the intervention if it is to be successful.
- Assumptions involve assumed transformation needs and processes in the initiative (tangible and hidden) for the programme to be implemented effectively and fairly across the sector to be successful in meeting its aims and expectations.

**Issues for exercise:** Review this scenario and from this the group will need to:

1. Make a preliminary assessment of assumptions and expectations (for ToC)
2. Report back after the breakout group to the plenary session.

**Format:** Small group (breakout) discussions and plenary feedback.

## **Exercise 2: Molecules to Landscapes funding call – stakeholder engagement and testing plan for the TBE**

**Scenario:** An 18-month theory-based evaluation is to be conducted of the efficacy, outcomes (short term) and prospective impacts of the Molecules to Landscape programme (as Exercise 1 scenario). A £45,000 (+ VAT) theory-based evaluation is to be externally commissioned to start on 31 March and with an early focus on developing a full theory of change for the programme which will build on preliminary ‘assumptions’ and ‘expectations’ developed by NERC and BBSRC. The evaluation specification provides for:

- a) Early (scoping) stakeholder liaison by evaluators in Spring 2022 to contribute to the development of the ToC
- b) Initial liaison with co-PIs of (6-10) funded projects.
- c) A final draft evaluation framework to be submitted to the NERC-BBSRC steering group for the Molecules to Landscape evaluation by 31 July 2022.
- d) An evaluation inception plan and draft evaluation instruments to be submitted on or by 1 September for NERC-BBSRC approval, followed by evidence gathering.
- e) An interim evaluation report to be submitted on or by 1 March 2023.

A draft final report is to be submitted by 30 September 2023 to include findings, implications and priorities for further related inter-disciplinary funding for NERC and BBSRC and implications also for UKRIs cross-Council review for future interdisciplinary research community development (as scenario 1).

*Molecules to Landscape* places a strong and forward-looking emphasis on cross-stakeholder community formation and capacity building, so it is anticipated that evaluators will adopt a robust and credible approach to co-production in the ToC development, evaluation design and in scrutiny of findings. Co-production is expected to be proportionate and to reflect the diverse stakeholders with an interest in this evolving area of applied research and its policy integration.

An outline TBE coproduction (and engagement) plan is now needed to brief evaluators on requirements and to set out:

- a) What stakeholder organisations and interests might be appropriately invited to be involved and at what stages of the evaluation.
- b) What staged engagement activities are needed to help develop the ToC and contribute to the TBE and its reporting.

It is not expected that all stakeholders to be involved will contribute to all stages (a) to e) as set out above.

**The exercise:** A draft TBE stakeholder engagement plan is needed now and where:

- Engagement breadth and processes should be staged and proportionate to needs
- It will make best use of key stakeholders but not over-burdening ‘key people’
- It will involve an appropriate range of stakeholders concerned with effective implementation and successful outcomes.

There is to be no provision in the evaluation budget for time/travel costs of stakeholder contributions inputs; stakeholder engagement will be self-funded.

**Issues for exercise:**

1. Review needs for a proportionate approach to external stakeholder engagement
2. Prepare a loose TBE engagement plan to identify which key stakeholder groupings are to be involved
3. Indicate what engagement methods (eg small group, sandbox, events, web consultation) will be used for what in puts/outputs for the TBE, and at what stages of the intervention.

**Format:** Small group (breakout) discussions and plenary feedback.