



IMPACT REPORT 2023–2025

Research Design for Social Impact

Rebellious Research for Social Action

A Continuing Professional Development Programme
delivered in partnership with the University of East London & University of Bristol
STAR Project — funded by the Office for Students (OfS) & Research England

202+

Applications received

139

Total learners enrolled
across 6 cohorts

74%

Applicants identified as
she/her

6

Cohorts delivered 2023–
2025

About This Report

This impact report documents the Research Design for Social Impact Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme delivered by Design for Social Impact Lab (DFSI Lab) between 2023 and 2025, in partnership with the University of East London (UEL) and the University of Bristol. The programme was part of the Social Transformation and Advocacy through Research (STAR) project — a collaboration funded by the Office for Students (OfS) and Research England — designed to dismantle structural barriers to research participation and careers for global majority communities and historically underserved groups.

Known across cohorts as "Rebellious Research for Social Action," the programme rejected the extractive logic of traditional research training. It was built on the conviction that communities are experts in their own lives; that knowledge systems shaped by colonialism and white supremacy must be actively challenged; and that research practice in the social sector should serve liberation, not compliance.

This report draws on participant feedback, cohort evaluation reports, facilitator reflections, application data from 202+ individuals, and CSV feedback surveys across multiple cohorts. It is written for current and prospective partners, funders, community organisations and practitioners who share the belief that evidence and research can — and must — be tools for collective power and structural change.

Programme Overview

Background & Rationale

Traditional Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning (MERL) practices within civil society often reproduce the very inequities organisations claim to address. They centre funder accountability over community accountability, demand extractive "evidence" from under-resourced grassroots organisations, and draw from epistemologies — ways of knowing — that erase Indigenous, decolonial and community-held knowledge systems.

The STAR project sought to address this. Design for Social Impact Lab was commissioned to deliver a CPD strand that would equip practitioners, volunteers and activists in civil society organisations with conceptual frameworks, practical tools and critical consciousness to design and deliver research rooted in equity, care and social justice.

Theory of Change: How This Programme Supported Research Pathways



Programme at a Glance

Programme title	Research Design for Social Impact CPD / "Rebellious Research for Social Action"
Delivery organisation	Design for Social Impact Lab (DFSILab)
Academic partners	University of East London (UEL) & University of Bristol
Funding	STAR Project — Office for Students (OfS) & Research England
Programme period	2023 – 2025 (Cohort 6 underway September 2025)
Format	Online, 6–7 sessions of 1–1.5 hours each, over 2–3 months, on Fridays
Cohort model	Cohorts 1–2: single-organisation; Cohorts 3–6: mixed-organisation
Platform	Kajabi learning management system + Zoom
Additional support	1:1 sessions offered to all previous cohorts; inter-cohort closing session planned October 2025
Resource hub	www.designforsocialimpact.io/research-hub-for-social-impact-for-uk-based-organisations

Cohort Data — Who Came, Who Stayed

Six cohorts have been delivered between October 2023 and September 2025. The first two were delivered as single-organisation partnerships; Cohorts 3–6 opened to mixed civil society groups, significantly expanding reach, diversity and cross-sector learning.

Cohort	Organisation(s)	Period	Registered
Cohort 1	Positively UK	Oct 2023 – Jan 2024	8
Cohort 2	Newham Community Project	May – Jul 2024	11
Cohort 3	Mixed (inc. SARI, Period Reality, RCCT, Birthrights, Refugee Council, Renaisi, Shelter, Helen Bamber, more)	Sep – Nov 2024	23
Cohort 4	Mixed (inc. Reset UK, Trans Legal Clinic, Rape Crisis South London, Love Tank, OLIVE alumni, more)	Jan – Mar 2025	19
Cohort 5	Mixed (inc. Muslim Northern Women, EBE Employment, Equalinks, CLAUUK, Xenia, Forward South, Power & Integrity, more)	Jun – Jul 2025	38
Cohort 6	Mixed — 40 enrolled from 202 applications (inc. Runnymede Trust, Black Women Rising, BLAM UK, People's Economy, more)	Sep 2025	40

Total across Cohorts 1–6: 139 learners enrolled in total across six cohorts.

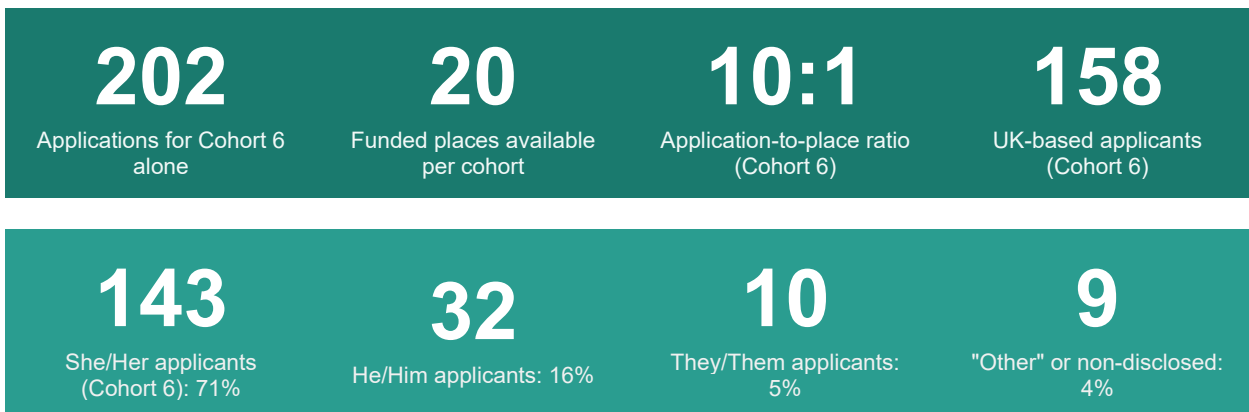
◆ On "Drop-Out" Rates

Unlike traditional courses, this programme offered asynchronous participation via recorded sessions and the learning platform. Some learners engaged with all content outside live sessions. Others completed activities and reflection tasks after sessions ended. Because the course does not operate on a "submission of work" model, completion figures should be read as indicative rather than definitive — reflecting diverse modes of engagement rather than failure. Cohort 2 (Newham Community Project) had 100% retention across 11 learners.

Understanding the Demand: Who Is Applying and Why

Over the course of two years, the program received 202 applications for 120 funded places — double oversubscription, despite very low circulation. This is not an anomaly. It is a signal. Across all cohorts, demand has consistently and dramatically outstripped supply. This section analyses what that demand tells us about the state of the social impact sector and the urgent gap this programme addresses.

The Numbers Tell a Story



Who Is Applying?

The applicants to this programme are not "emerging" practitioners in the conventional sense — many are senior, experienced social impact professionals with decades of work behind them. What unites them is not inexperience but the recognition that the frameworks they were trained in are insufficient — or actively harmful — for the communities they serve. They are:

Sector breadth

- Racial justice and anti-racism workers
- Refugee and asylum seeker support organisations
- HIV and sexual health charities
- Disability rights and advocacy groups
- Housing and homelessness organisations

Identity and lived experience

- Majority from Global Majority (Black, Brown, Asian, racialised) backgrounds
- Refugees, asylum seekers and those with forced migration experience
- Disabled people and neurodivergent practitioners

- Climate and environmental justice advocates
- Community health and cancer support workers
- Youth work, education and care leavers
- Economic justice and community wealth building
- Grassroots arts and cultural organisations
- Gender-based violence and women's rights
- LGBTQ+ community organisations
- Participatory action researchers and evaluators
- NHS and public sector equity leads
- Higher education equity and inclusion practitioners
- LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse individuals
- People from low-income or working-class backgrounds
- People with lived experience of the justice system
- Single parents and primary caregivers
- People without access to employer-funded CPD
- Early career practitioners unable to afford formal postgraduate study
- People who have started and been forced to stop PhDs due to financial barriers
- One Participant from Gaza joined due to the University of Bristol's connection with higher education sector

Why Are People Signing Up? A Thematic Analysis

Analysis of stated reasons for applying across Cohorts 3–6 (from application forms and feedback surveys across 200+ individuals) reveals five dominant themes:

◆ Theme 1: The tools they have are not fit for purpose

The most consistent message across applications is that mainstream MERL and research training — delivered through universities, professional bodies or employers — fails to equip practitioners for work with communities experiencing structural oppression. Applicants describe feeling "trapped" by compliance-driven evaluation, funder extraction demands, and research frameworks designed by and for institutions that do not reflect their communities. One applicant from London Borough of Hackney described how "monitoring and evaluation is designed around what funders want to measure rather than what communities actually need."

"I am really keen on changing the way we research in my current job. The current system has no voice for the people we are researching."

"I have done award-winning research in justice and equity in research contexts. I am also an evaluator in the development education world. I find that it is a challenge to practically do equity-centred research when organisations have traditional approaches. I want to develop stronger approaches."

◆ Theme 2: Lived experience as motivation

A substantial proportion of applicants explicitly ground their application in personal experience of marginalisation. Refugees describe wanting to use research to amplify the voices of their communities. Disabled practitioners describe inaccessible research cultures. Black women describe fighting institutional racism while trying to evidence impact in ways that feel true. This is not professional development as credential accumulation — it is people seeking tools to do the work their lives have prepared them for.

"I am a refugee woman who has experienced first-hand what it means to be excluded from decision-making and research processes that shape our lives. This course feels like an opportunity to change that."

"As a socio-economically disadvantaged, queer, disabled Black woman, I carry lived experience of layered oppressions into every space I enter. These experiences ground my values of justice, empathy, freedom, and collective care — and they drive me to seek ways of embedding those values into research and design."

◆ Theme 3: Resistance to extractive research culture

Applicants across all cohorts describe a specific and growing frustration: they have been both subjects of extractive research (communities mined for data) and enforcers of it (expected to deliver compliance metrics that do not reflect real change). They are looking for practical, theoretically grounded alternatives — not critique alone, but tools for different practice.

"Communities are mined for data, stories commodified, and the promise of solidarity reduced to outputs and KPIs which are inaccessible to the people it claims to centre."

"Too often, "intersectionality" and "experts by experience" are invoked without substance. With fascism tightening its grip in the UK, I know the time to sharpen and expand my practice is now."

◆ Theme 4: Financial and structural barriers to learning

A striking proportion of applicants explicitly name financial precarity as a reason the funded nature of this programme matters. Many work for organisations without CPD budgets. Others are freelancers, volunteers or people between roles. Several have started and been forced to abandon postgraduate study due to financial constraints. The programme is not just filling a knowledge gap — it is one of the only accessible routes into this kind of learning for the people who need it most.

"As a single mother who works with women in the community who have not got access to work or education or have experienced trauma, I started a self-funding PhD but can no longer continue as a government doctoral loan does not cover bills and university fees."

"As a freelancer, I do not typically have the benefit of organisational funding and referrals for professional development, so I am seeking opportunities like this one."

◆ Theme 5: Decolonial and abolitionist frameworks

A growing and significant cluster of applicants come with explicit grounding in decolonial theory, Black feminist scholarship, Indigenous knowledge frameworks, and abolitionist practice. They are not seeking an introduction to these ideas — they are seeking a community of practice and practical tools for embedding these frameworks into their everyday MERL work. This signals that the programme has established a reputation as a genuinely politically grounded space, not a diversity-flavoured add-on to conventional research training.

"I want to integrate participatory, feminist, collaborative methodologies into my work — and name oppression and colonialism as present, not just sidestep those words because it might make others uncomfortable."

The Organisations: A Movement Ecosystem

The organisations represented across all six cohorts together constitute something remarkable — a cross-sector, cross-geography ecosystem of UK social justice practice. They are not a random selection. They cluster around specific sites of structural struggle: racial justice, migration rights, disability

liberation, economic justice, gender-based violence, and community health equity. Together, they reveal both where the demand for this programme lives and what the social impact sector is grappling with.

Full List of Participating Organisations Across All Cohorts

Health, HIV & Wellbeing

- Positively UK
- NHS / Macmillan Cancer Support
- Black Women Rising (Leanne Pero Foundation)
- Project 6
- Emotion Dysregulation Autism
- Curious Collective
- Healthwatch Leeds

Racial Justice & Anti-Racism

- SARI — Stand Against Racism & Inequality
- The Runnymede Trust
- BLAM UK / Race on the Agenda
- Power & Integrity
- Mabadiliko CIC
- Mabadiliko

Refugee, Migration & Asylum Rights

- Refugee Council
- Helen Bamber Foundation
- BHN (Bristol Hospitality Network) — in solidarity with destitute asylum seekers
- Reset UK
- Feniks
- CLAUK
- LEX Scotland
- United Domestic Workers Association
- Romanian Culture and Charity Together (RCCT)
- British Red Cross / Care4Calais
- Borderlands

Disability Rights & Justice

- Disability Rights UK
- Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC)
- Scope
- The Access to Work Collective
- Freelance disability inclusion consultants

Housing, Economic & Community Justice

- Shelter
- London Borough of Hackney
- Newham Community Project
- People's Economy
- Timebanking UK
- Community Wealth Building organisations

Gender Justice & Women's Rights

- Birthrights
- Women & Girls Network
- Period Reality
- Rape Crisis South London
- Muslim Northern Women

LGBTQ+ Rights

- Trans Legal Clinic
- The Love Tank
- The Advocacy Academy

Youth, Education & Care

- BLAM UK
- The Advocacy Academy
- EBE Employment / Equalinks
- OLive alumni
- Girlguiding
- Fusion Arts
- Archibeats

Research, Evaluation & Philanthropy

- Renaisi / TSIP
- Baobab Foundation (peer reviewers)
- Birmingham Voluntary Service Council
- Power & Integrity
- The Phoenix Way / Forward South
- Union of Justice
- Kowtha Constellation
- Xenia
- Liverpool World Centre / EBE
- Kingston University London
- UEL postgraduate students

What These Organisations Share

◆ A common thread

These organisations are not united by sector — they span health, housing, arts, legal advocacy, economic justice and more. What unites them is a shared commitment to working alongside structurally marginalised communities, and a shared frustration with the research and evidence cultures imposed on them by funders, institutions and government bodies that do not reflect the communities they serve. They are, in effect, the frontline of social justice practice in the UK — and they are hungry for research frameworks that match their values.

What Participants Learned

The learning outcomes below synthesise evidence from anonymous feedback surveys across Cohorts 1–6, application-to-completion tracking, and facilitator observation. They are organised not as bullet points of competence, but as the genuine shifts in thinking and practice that participants reported.

1. From Neutral to Political: Reframing What Research Is

The foundational shift reported by nearly every participant was understanding research not as a neutral, technical activity but as a political one — embedded in histories of power, extraction and epistemic violence. This was not simply abstract critique. Participants described how it changed the way they looked at evaluation forms, funder requirements, data collection tools, and their own professional practice.

"It is not just understanding the concepts and history. It is also integrating anti-oppressive and anti-colonial approaches into every part of our work. This can be uncomfortable, especially when working with a client or collaborator who holds the funds and does not understand how oppression is happening."

"The training shifted my mindset."

2. Intersectionality as Practice, Not Theory

Intersectionality was consistently rated as the most impactful session across cohorts. Participants emphasised that for many of them, intersectionality as a framework was familiar — but applying it to research design, data collection and analysis was new. The shift from intersectionality as concept to intersectionality as methodological commitment was significant.

"The intersectionality session was the most valuable — it is a missing part in our work."

"The idea that intersectionality exists even within marginalised racialised communities is an eye-opener that will inform a lot of future work whether research-related or otherwise."

3. Co-Design and Community Ownership

Participants consistently moved from a conception of participation as data collection (involving communities in surveys, interviews) to participation as co-design — involving communities from the very

beginning in defining questions, designing methods, and co-interpreting findings. This shift carries significant implications for how organisations structure their monitoring and evaluation processes.

"Working with the community from the first point — I used to think of participation mostly in terms of data collection and realise it is much bigger than that."

"I plan to involve service users in establishing which factors they want to include in the evaluation and monitoring process, rather than establishing them myself and reinforcing power imbalances."

4. Anti-Colonial and Anti-Racist Research Methods

Session 3 — on anti-colonial and anti-racist approaches — consistently generated the deepest reflections in feedback. Participants described not just gaining new tools but confronting the ways their existing practice had unconsciously reproduced colonial patterns. Guest speakers from Global Majority academic backgrounds significantly deepened this session.

"Before taking this course I had already begun integrating participatory, feminist, collaborative methodologies into my work. Two things came out for me: first, I want to name oppression and colonialism as present, not sidestep those words because it might make others uncomfortable; second, bringing these methodologies not just into how I plan research but into conversations about new projects and contracts."

5. Pedagogies of Care and Solidarity

The standalone Pedagogies of Care and Solidarity module was consistently named as one of the most distinctive and valued elements of the programme — and one that participants described as absent from every other CPD or research training they had encountered. This module does not treat care as a warm-up activity. It positions care as a political and methodological commitment: necessary for research that does not harm the communities it works with, and essential for sustaining practitioners doing social justice work in extractive institutional conditions.

Drawing on the work of bell hooks, Adrienne Maree Brown, Tricia Hersey and Black feminist pedagogy, the module explores rest as resistance, solidarity as methodology, and the ethics of care in research relationships. For Black and Global Majority participants navigating predominantly white institutions and research cultures, this session named something that had previously gone unnamed: the right to do research without being consumed by it.

"Co-design, anti-oppressive theory and method, pedagogies of care and solidarity — I appreciated the mix of theory and very practical tools."

"This session provided a space to think deeply about how we can indirectly engage in oppressive approaches when researching — and also about solidarity building and my purpose for wanting to collect research at all."

6. Practical Activist Methodologies — Photovoice, Cartography, Co-Analysis

Participants valued highly the sessions that connected politics to practice — particularly the introduction to Photovoice, community cartography and co-analysis. Many reported specific plans to apply these methods immediately in their work. The NCP cohort's co-analysis session using the SHOWED method provoked some of the richest conversations of the programme about belonging, community and motherhood.

"Photovoice will be one of my options of research going forward."

"Co-analysis of data brings in nuance and supports an equitable narrative and outcomes for all."

7. Self-Reflection, Positionality and Researcher Identity

A theme running through all cohorts was the value of structured self-reflection — particularly exercises on positionality, privilege and researcher identity. For many participants, this was the first professional learning space that invited this kind of personal inquiry. Several described lasting changes in how they understood themselves in relation to their work.

"I have been so excited by the descriptions of participatory research methods and co-design. I am also becoming more aware of my own privileges and events in my life that have strongly shaped who I am. To do social justice work, we need to start with knowing who we are as individuals and how we relate to other people."

8. Building a Community of Resistance

Across feedback surveys, participants cited the community of learners — across organisations, sectors and identities — as one of the most valuable dimensions of the course. The cross-pollination of approaches from different fields (maternity racial justice, refugee advocacy, housing, disability activism) was repeatedly described as generating new thinking impossible to find in siloed professional networks.

"It stays with you in a way that other CPD courses do not — the materials, the activities, the discussions, the speakers — not only do you have sustained input and learning over the weeks, but it provides the foundation, tools and signposting to continue learning. Connecting with others with the same mindset is so invigorating."

"You come away with many inspiring ideas and tools as well as a community to continue the conversation with."

— Participant, international feedback cohort

Guest Scholars: Representing Global Majority Research Leadership

A deliberate structural feature of the programme across Cohorts 3–6 was the integration of guest scholars from Black and Global Majority academic backgrounds. This was not a diversity gesture, it was a strategic act of representation, demonstrating through sustained presence that research careers are possible for people from communities historically excluded from the academy, and that Global Majority intellectual traditions are rigorous, legitimate and generative.

Participants consistently rated guest scholar sessions among the most impactful of the programme — not only for the content shared but for what each scholar's presence meant in the room. Every guest brought not only academic expertise but lived experience of the same racialised institutional barriers many participants were navigating themselves.

Siza Dube · Session 3: Anti-Colonial and Anti-Racist Approaches · Cohorts 3–5

London-based Black feminisms researcher, workshop facilitator and charity consultant. Doctoral researcher on the Leverhulme Welfare, Citizenship and Intersectional Feminism Project at the University of Bristol, specialising in the histories of Black women organising around welfare inequalities and reproductive justice in the UK. She facilitates Black feminist workshops for children and young people, equipping them to reimagine the world and advocate for their futures.

Amanda Chappell · Session 4: Activist Methodologies · Cohorts 3–5

Doctoral researcher at the University of Bristol. Her work examines the construction of health and social care commissioning datasets and how these may perpetuate or mitigate racial inequalities in service provision and access. Over 20 years of experience in health and social care at operational and strategic levels, with a deep commitment to reducing racialised health inequalities for Black populations. Her session on QuantCrit and activist methodologies showed how quantitative data can be used for, not against, racial justice.

Mónica Sánchez Hernández · Session 5: Co-Analysis · Cohorts 3–5

An Indigenous-rooted, working-class woman from the Global South/Global Majority. PhD student of Social Policy at the University of Bristol, previously studying in Brazil, Belgium, Mexico and France. Her current research examines understandings of manhood within and without prison using art-based and decolonising methodologies. Her contributions to the co-analysis session demonstrated how decolonial methods operate across radically different cultural and institutional contexts.

Chiedza Chihanu · Anti-Colonial Research Methods · Cohort 4

A scholar-activist specialising in performance and social change. As a researcher and applied theatre practitioner, Chiedza has dedicated her career to exploring the transformative power of performance in carceral spaces. She holds a PhD from the University of Leeds, focusing on performances in prisons with incarcerated women in Zimbabwe. Across multiple feedback surveys, participants cited her as delivering the single most impactful session of the programme. Participant feedback: "I found session 3 on anti-colonial and anti-racist approaches, complemented by Chiedza's presentation, extremely useful." "I particularly enjoyed Chiedza's class. I found her approach to research innovative." Her work made visible, in the room, what Black research leadership looks like in practice.

Dr. Michelle Harewood · Anti-Colonial Research Methods · Cohort 6

Presented her research on Nottiing Hill carnival as a form of resistance. Michelle's work focuses on how cultural narratives can be used to reconstruct human lives whilst fighting the impact of cultural trauma, racism, and oppression. She combines her work as a therapist with her activism to create frameworks that promote healing justice. She is also a public speaking coach who uses different forms of cultural storytelling to support the use of voice within rights activism.

Dr. Temidayo Esenou · Anti-Colonial Research Methods · Cohort 5

Guest scholar who facilitated a session on Afro Futurism as Qualitative Inquiry. Described by participants as "very practical, really useful — and inspiring." Her descriptions of her research work grounded theoretical content in lived practice — showing participants not just how theory and practice meet but why it matters for communities whose knowledge has historically been distorted in interpretation.

Prof. Winston Goode & Dr. Darren Sharpe · MRes Social Justice Pathway · University of East London

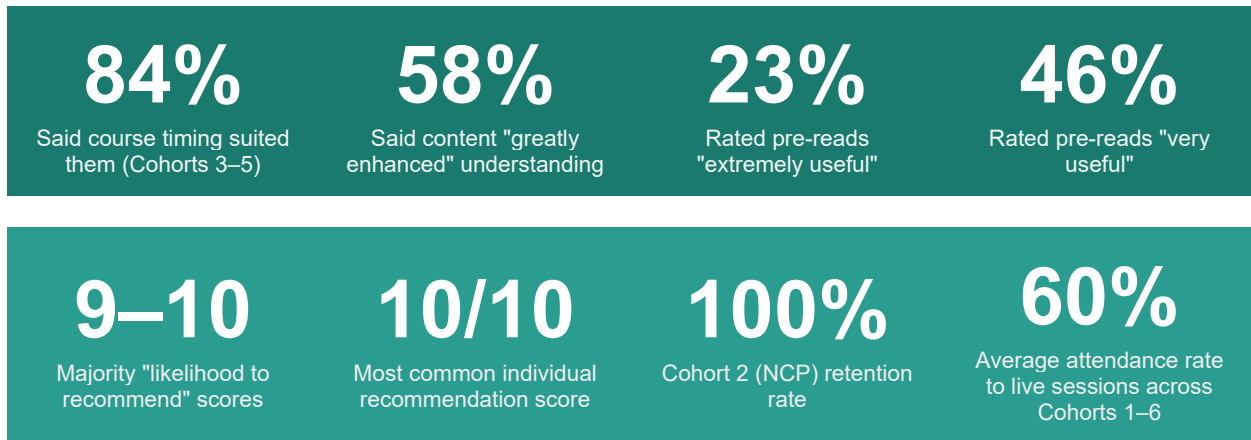
University of East London. Part of the leadership team that designed the STAR project. Presented information about the MRes Social Justice programme pathway to cohort participants, creating a direct bridge between the CPD and academic progression for Global Majority practitioners and researchers. Their presence signalled institutional endorsement and opened a door many participants had not previously considered.

"It's hard to single out one session. They all brought something that made me think completely differently. They all made me realise how little I know about life, people, the world — in the very best of ways. But I did adore the sessions with the guest speakers. I felt they were a really helpful way of seeing how the concepts we were learning had been applied in the world."

— Course participant, Cohort 5

Feedback Data Summary

The following data is drawn from anonymous post-course surveys across Cohorts 2–6, including a specific international feedback cohort. All rating scales are noted below.



"Educating oneself on decolonial and anti-oppressive research methodologies that will help give back power to racialised and marginalised communities could not be easier or more enjoyable with this short course. It is a short course that does not take up too much of your time and is highly recommended for anyone hoping to inspire change in research design."

— Nina Rivera, United Domestic Workers Association

"This year, I have had a complete shift in mindset and worldview, and this course has been the first time that I have been able to explore that in a structured way. It has been transformative for me. It feels like a starting point for a different direction in my life. I am so grateful."

— Course participant

"Thank you again for running such a fantastic course in June/July, I was so honoured to be selected and I can't begin to explain how useful it's been to me - to the point that I'm starting a new community research role!"

— Elio Yague, Course participant

"Design for Social Impact is a great course for anyone considering participatory research within their organisation and beyond. We got a broad foundational background of inequality within research practices, and also learnt how to counter them through collective-based analysis. I am excited to be applying my learning to our community movement-building work to ensure ethical and anti-oppressive methodologies."

— Bhavika Patel, Power & Integrity

What This Tells Us About Social Justice in the UK

The data and testimony gathered across six cohorts of this programme is more than an evaluation of a CPD course. Read carefully, it constitutes a form of evidence about the state of social justice practice — and the conditions under which it operates — in the United Kingdom today. Four observations stand out.

◆ Observation 1: The "evidence" system is broken — and practitioners know it

Across cohorts, practitioners consistently describe a profound tension between the evidence demands placed on civil society organisations by funders and government, and the actual complexity of the social change they are pursuing. They are asked to prove impact in ways that erase community agency, compress systemic change into measurable outputs, and reproduce harm by treating marginalised people as data points rather than knowledge producers. The demand for this programme is, in part, a collective response to this broken system. Practitioners are not saying "we don't know how to do research." They are saying "we know the research we have been taught to do is wrong."

◆ Observation 2: The UK social sector is in a period of radical methodological ferment

The breadth and sophistication of applicant statements — spanning decolonial theory, Black feminist scholarship, disability justice, Indigenous epistemologies and abolitionist frameworks — reveals a sector that is, quietly but seriously, undergoing a radical intellectual shift. Practitioners are reading Kimberlé Crenshaw, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Adrienne Maree Brown and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. They are not waiting for institutions to change. They are changing their practice themselves, and looking for frameworks and community to support that change.

◆ Observation 3: Global majority communities are leading social justice knowledge production

The majority of participants across all cohorts are from Global Majority (Black, Brown, Asian and otherwise racialised) communities. They are not passive recipients of research conducted about them. They are the researchers, evaluators, programme leads and community organisers — and they are insisting on research epistemologies that reflect their communities' own ways of knowing. The programme's inclusion of Global Majority doctoral researchers as guest speakers was not tokenism — it was recognition of an already-existing leadership that the academy has systematically failed to honour.

◆ Observation 4: The cost of inaccessible professional development is borne disproportionately by those who need it most

The application data reveals a clear pattern: the practitioners most urgently in need of this kind of learning are precisely those least able to access conventional professional development. They work for under-resourced grassroots organisations. They are solo freelancers or volunteers. They are caregivers working evenings. They are people whose employers offer no CPD budget. The oversubscription of this programme — 202 applications — is not just evidence of demand. It is evidence of a structural failure in how the sector invests in the learning of the people closest to the communities it serves.

"This course is one of the most sensitively designed, inclusive, and transformative learning opportunities I have ever participated in. It is a safe space to learn and discuss some of the most fundamental issues facing researchers — but which are often and worryingly missing from courses and training about research."

— Course participant, Cohort 5

Accessibility & Inclusion in Practice

The programme did not merely talk about inclusion — it practised it. From the point of application, accessibility was built in. A detailed record of accommodation requests and responses demonstrates that inclusion was structural, not incidental.

The programme did not treat trauma-informed practice as a session topic or a content warning. It was embedded in the architecture of every learning session — from how the course was scheduled, to how feedback was collected, to how guest scholars were invited to share their work on their own terms.

<h2>All sessions</h2> <p>offered asynchronously — no learner penalised for managing health, care or crisis</p>	<h2>All materials</h2> <p>provided 48hrs in advance — reducing overwhelm and cognitive load</p>	<h2>30%</h2> <p>Of Cohort 6 applicants requested accessibility accommodations (disability, neurodivergence, sensory needs)</p>	<h2>Camera-optional</h2> <p>throughout every cohort — no surveillance of structurally marginalised bodies in learning spaces</p>
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Accommodations provided

- Dyslexia-friendly fonts (Arial, OpenDyslexic) and screen-reader compatible formats
- Session recordings with captions and transcripts on the Kajabi platform
- Materials distributed 48+ hours in advance for neurodivergent participants
- Reduced-brightness slide design; advance notice of high-contrast materials
- Camera-optional sessions — particularly important for limited-bandwidth access
- British Sign Language interpreter availability on request
- Assistive technology compatibility for all digital materials
- Written instructions for all activities and breakout room tasks

Scheduling adaptations

- Evening sessions (Mon 7:30–8:45pm) for Cohort 2 — accommodating daytime caregiving responsibilities
- Course pause during Ramadan and Eid (Cohort 2)
- Fortnightly schedule option for Cohort 1 (Positively UK) as requested by organisation
- Friday mornings for Cohorts 3–6 — allowing decompression before weekends, widely cited as a good time for CPD
- Asynchronous pathway available for all cohorts — ensuring no learner was excluded by scheduling conflicts
- Low-tech design throughout — Google tools and documents optimised for mobile phone access (critical for Cohort 2 where most participants joined via phone)

Limitations & Honest Reflections

A programme committed to accountability to communities must also be honest about its own limitations. These reflections are drawn from facilitator notes, post-cohort evaluations and participant feedback across all six cohorts.

Key Lesson	Reflection	Action
Completion metrics are imprecise	The programme does not use a "submission of work" model, and asynchronous participation makes defining completion complex. The 60% figure is indicative.	Develop clearer, multi-modal completion indicators that reflect diverse modes of engagement without reducing them to attendance.

Key Lesson	Reflection	Action
Feedback survey completion was low in some cohorts	Inconsistency in gathering feedback from participants, limiting quantitative data.	Integrate feedback collection within live sessions rather than relying on post-course surveys.
MRes pathway inaccessible to many	The offer of a sponsored MRes at UEL created expectation but the fee waiver did not apply to international students or those with existing qualifications.	Provide clear, accurate information about all pathway eligibility — including for international students and refugees — before enrolment.
Short notice for acceptance	At least one participant received only two days' notice before cohort start, insufficient to clear diary commitments.	Establish a clear, communicated timeline: application close, decision communication, and cohort start, with at least two weeks' notice.
Session depth vs. breadth tension	Multiple participants noted 1.5 hours left insufficient time to fully engage with complex concepts. Several requested half-day or full-day formats.	Explore extended session options or supplementary asynchronous deep-dives for participants who wish to go further.
Camera absence in online settings	In Cohort 2, all participants joined without cameras throughout. While accessible, this reduced facilitator feedback and community building.	Design more explicit community-building moments that do not rely on camera visibility — audio check-ins, collaborative documents, and breakout spaces.
Reading load	Some participants noted the pre-reads were substantial. At least one participant noted a need to review materials again.	Review reading volume and prioritise the most essential texts; offer short explainer videos as alternatives or supplements.
Attendance expectations unclear at point of registration	Cohort 2 participants noted they had not been given clear expectations about attendance and homework at the start.	Include a clear participation policy (attendance expectations, homework commitment, asynchronous options) in all acceptance communications.

Resources Produced

A key deliverable of this programme was an open-access Resource Hub — eight practical guides freely available to any UK community-based organisation committed to anti-oppressive research practice. These guides emerged directly from course content and are designed to ensure the learning outlasts individual cohorts.

All resources are freely available at: www.designforsocialimpact.io/research-hub-for-social-impact-for-uk-based-organisations

Guide	Description	Key Topics
Guide 1: Introduction & Rethinking Evidence	Why research design matters — an orientation to the politics of evidence, knowledge production and community accountability.	Epistemic justice; what counts as evidence; community expertise; challenging the neutral researcher myth
Guide 2: Designing Trauma-Informed Research Ethics	How to design ethical research processes that centre care, dignity and safety — especially when working with communities that have experienced systemic harm.	Informed consent; protecting participant identity; power-sharing in analysis; safety and trust

Guide	Description	Key Topics
Guide 3: Intersectionality in Community Research	How to design research that recognises overlapping identities — centring those at the margins and naming systems of oppression.	Intersectional research design; disaggregating data carefully; avoiding tokenism and "oppression olympics"
Guide 4: Creative & Grassroots Methods Toolkit	Photovoice, community cartography and other participatory methods where communities control the camera and the narrative.	Photovoice (SHOWED method); community mapping; arts-based methods; ethical photography and consent
Guide 5: Co-Design in Research	How to move from consulting communities to co-creating research — from design through to analysis and dissemination.	Co-production principles; participatory analysis; member checking; co-deciding how to share results
Guide 6: Co-Analysis — Making Meaning Together	How to analyse research data with your community, not just about them — transforming participants into co-researchers.	Collective sense-making; facilitating dialogue and disagreement; validating findings; sharing power in interpretation
Guide 7: Resisting Funder Extraction	Strategies for navigating funder demands for "evidence" while protecting community knowledge, dignity and power.	Funder extraction as racial and class justice issue; negotiating reporting; budgeting for MERL; data sovereignty
Guide 8: Knowledge Justice & Community Archiving	How to build knowledge practices that sustain your work beyond grant cycles and protect community stories from erasure.	Community archiving; consent and data security; accessible archives; using archives to build movement power

The resource pack is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) — free to share and adapt for non-commercial use, with attribution. It draws on the work of Black feminist scholars (Crenshaw, Lorde, Collins, hooks), Indigenous scholars (Tuhiwai Smith, Shawn Wilson), participatory action researchers (Freire, Fals-Borda, Budd Hall) and disability justice activists (Mia Mingus, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha).

Key Lessons for Future Iterations

Key Lesson	Reflection	Action
Expand the mixed-organisation model	Cross-sector learning was cited repeatedly as the most distinctive feature — participants built solidarities impossible in siloed professional development.	Continue and grow mixed-cohort delivery; explore themed cohorts (e.g., disability justice cluster, racial health equity cluster).
Launch a collaborative blog	Multiple cohorts independently suggested a shared platform to document application of learning.	Co-create a blog with participants and UEL/JoB research teams documenting how organisations apply course learning in practice.
Introduce a standalone pedagogies of care session	Care and solidarity were embedded across sessions but participants wanted explicit focus on these as frameworks.	Add a dedicated session on pedagogies of care, healing justice and solidarity as a standalone curriculum element.
Sustain and deepen guest speaker model	Guest speakers from Global Majority academic backgrounds were among the most impactful course elements.	Expand the guest speaker programme; consider paid speaking roles to appropriately resource scholars' contributions.

Key Lesson	Reflection	Action
Develop hands-on project integration	Participants learn best when applying frameworks directly to their own work.	Require participants to sign up with a project or question in mind; structure sessions around applying tools to live challenges.
Build toward accreditation	Participants and organisations want formal recognition that travels outside the course community.	Explore formal CPD accreditation, digital badging or progression into academic qualifications.
Honest MRes pathway communication	The UEL MRes offer created hope and confusion for ineligible participants.	Provide full eligibility information — including access for international students, refugees and those with existing qualifications — before enrolment begins.
Scale with care	The 202-application, 20-place ratio shows overwhelming demand. But scaling should not compromise the intimacy and community that make the course transformative.	Consider parallel cohort delivery, alumni mentoring programmes, and train-the-trainer models to scale without diluting quality.
Inter-cohort connections	An inter-cohort closing session is planned for October 2025. This kind of cross-cohort solidarity has not yet been systematically built.	Establish a permanent alumni network and community platform to sustain connections across cohorts, sectors and geographies.

Looking Forward

Research is not neutral. It has been — and continues to be — used as a tool of oppression. But when communities control the research process, define their own questions, and use findings to build power, research becomes an act of resistance.

The demand for this programme — 202 applications, is not just a metric. It is a reckoning. It tells us that across the UK social sector, practitioners working at the sharpest edge of social injustice are reaching for different tools, different frameworks, different ways of knowing. They are finding those tools here.

Priorities for the programme through 2026 include:

- Completing Cohort 6 and hosting the first inter-cohort closing session (October 2025)
- Expanding the open-access resource hub with new guides, case studies and how-to videos
- Developing the collaborative research blog with UEL and UoB research teams
- Exploring formal CPD accreditation and recognition pathways
- Strengthening the connection between CPD and the MRes Social Justice pathway — with honest, comprehensive information about access
- Building an alumni community of practice across all six cohorts
- Deepening the integration of abolitionist, Indigenous and Black radical imagination into the curriculum — not just as critique but as genuine alternative epistemologies

"These resources are offered in the spirit of solidarity, care and collective struggle. May they support your work in building a more just world. — Design for Social Impact Lab"

Contact & Further Information

Organisation	Design for Social Impact Lab
Website	www.designforsocialimpact.io
Email	hello@designforsocialimpact.io
Resource Hub	www.designforsocialimpact.io/research-hub-for-social-impact-for-uk-based-organisations
Academic Partners	University of East London (UEL) & University of Bristol
STAR Project	www.uel.ac.uk/our-research/social-transformation-advocacy-through-research-star-project
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