

University of York



Trials in Public Policy

Project Introduction

An ESRC Researcher Development Initiative developed by Professor Stephen Gorard and Dr Carole Torgerson at the University of York.

Introduction to our initiative

The randomised controlled trial (RCT) is considered a very valuable research design in assessing the effectiveness of public policy interventions, but it is also widely regarded as problematic for evaluating complex interventions of the kind often encountered in education, criminal justice and the wider social sciences. The response to these concerns has been to support the development of a model for complex interventions, calling for the consideration of a fuller research cycle involving theory and in-depth study as well as the trial itself. This has been used successfully as a basis for trials in education and health promotion, and has important similarities to the more recent 'design experiment' methodology applied to educational innovation.

A group of researchers based at the University of York has recognised the growing need for wider understanding of the use of trials in public policy, and instituted a supportive collaboration (the York Trials Methods Group) among Departments that are undertaking trials. The group is currently undertaking trials in education, psychology, crime, social work, health studies, and economics. Its collaboration provides mutual support and expertise via meetings and workshops, and has a training function to support the academic development of junior staff

within the university. For example, a trials methods course is run annually for postgraduate students and researchers. The same group is behind the planned setting up of the £20 million 'Institute for Effective Education' at York. In addition, the group has been tasked, as part of the ESRC Researcher Development Initiative, to offer similar support to social science and public policy researchers on a national basis. By widening our collaboration we also increase the likelihood that very large trials involving more than one centre can be undertaken.

The term 'trials' here is understood very widely, and includes randomised controlled trials, natural experiments, design studies, and even thought-experiments. Future activities include face-to-face and residential workshops, debates, internet discussions, web-based resources, published protocols in downloadable form, and methodological papers. In order to provide and create these resources, we have assembled a team of experts in the conduct of public policy interventions based across the UK and abroad (see below).

Across a range of fields in public policy, we wish to contribute to the growth of the number of researchers who hold mature and reasonable views on the value of rigorous interventions, who can be appropriately critical and appreciative of progress in this area.

REGISTER YOUR INTEREST WITH US: If you would like to be included in our mailing database, or get involved in the project in any way, then please send your contact details to us via:

The RDI Trials Project Administrator

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Forthcoming Events:

First event for the 'consumers' of research evidence

One of our concerns is that trial methods in public policy are not always understood by the 'consumers' and users of research evidence – the very people that the trials are conducted to assist. Therefore, one key strand of our initiative will focus on resources to help assess the value of evidence from trials.

The first face-to-face event supported by this initiative will be held in York on 3rd April 2006. Attendance at this one-day event is free to all comers, and free lunch and refreshments will be provided.

First event for research methods trainers

One of the most important and sustainable elements of this initiative will be the preparation of resources for high-quality teaching resources to be used in courses such as the ESRC 1+3 methods training for postgraduate research students. Such resources could be particularly valuable for small departments or centres without a strong tradition of experimental work. In order to help prepare such resources and ensure that they are relevant, useful and pedagogically sound, we would like to invite a number of existing research methods lecturers and trainers from across the social sciences to join this project. These trainers would constitute a working-group for whom *we will provide the funding to meet on several occasions to decide on teaching needs and to design and pilot the resources. We will pay for travel, subsistence and any necessary accommodation.* The first one-day meeting for this working-group will be on 3rd May 2006. It is crucial that the group represents a range of expertise, subjects and institutions. Therefore, we are asking anyone involved in research methods teaching provision – whether new lecturer or course convener, with any methodological background, with any or no knowledge of trials – to contact us, or to pass this request on to someone else in their organisation.

Coming up: Our First Annual Conference on Trials Methods for use in Public Policy Evaluations will be held in York from 13th to 15th September 2006. Keynote speakers will be Professor Thomas Cook, (*Northwestern University, USA*) and Dr Phil Davies, (*Cabinet Office, UK*). Invited speakers include, Professor Laurence Moore, (*Cardiff University, UK*) Dr Robert Coe, (*Curriculum, Evaluation and Management Centre, Durham University, UK*), Jacque Mallender (*Matrix Research & Consultancy, UK*) and Dr Jonathan Green, (*University of Manchester, UK*). Further details will follow in future issues, or visit our website for the most current information - www.trials-pp.co.uk.

To reserve a place or find out more about any of the above events, or to submit an abstract for consideration by the Conference Academic Committee, please contact us:

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Contact Us

WE'RE ON THE WEB
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