

University of York



Trials in Public Policy

Project Update

Our ESRC RDI 'trials' project held its first face-to-face event last month. This was well-attended by a range of concerned participants from a variety of policy and social science backgrounds, a range of levels of experience, and from as far afield as Scotland and Wiltshire. Thanks to all for coming and contributing.

Stephen Gorard & Carole Torgerson

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What should we do in the absence of trials?

Stephen Gorard

The first event raised a number of interesting themes that are likely to continue through our next meetings, leading up to the International Conference in September. We considered the merit of adapting an equivalent of the Consort Guidelines for reporting randomised controlled trials in social science. We were not agreed on the extent to which researchers should be held responsible for whether their findings did or did not affect policy and practice, and if not then who was. We discussed a range of quality issues exemplified in a series of published RCTs in education and criminal justice, and discussed the difficulty of making policy and research recommendations that do not coincide with a strong policy imperative. Although no trial is likely to be 'perfect' it was felt that policy, research and practice are best informed when researchers produce transparent reports of their experiments. We discussed whether it was worth seeking 'power' calculations to help observe quite small effects, or whether, in our current state of relative ignorance, we should focus on the large and the obvious.

We were pleased that the opinions expressed throughout the day represented a variety of different viewpoints, ranging from those of us who are worried by the number of trials in any area that lead to the conclusion that the intervention is ineffective; to those of us faced with the same evidence who believe that an increase in the conduct of fair tests in any area of social science will lead to us being better able to pick interventions that are likely to be effective. The difficulty, for those of us more in favour of RCTs, is that so many interventions are currently being protected from rigorous evaluation by their

proponents that we can not improve our ability to pick 'winners'. We raised the issue, sometimes attributed to Ernest Rutherford, of whether a trial needs a complex statistical analysis of results, or whether the design of a good trial should actually replace the *post hoc* dredging. We discussed the appropriate role of trials within a full cycle of research from preliminary investigation to 'engineering' the results into practice.

For me, one of the most interesting of the issues raised in discussion was what we should do, in policy-relevant work, in the current absence of trials. Should we allow the vacuum to be filled by the weaker kinds of evidence that might be available to answer a what-works question? Or should we reject other evidence out-of-hand as unsuitable, and conclude that we do not know what works, in this case? As an illustration, consider my position recently when working with a team of colleagues on a review of evidence of how to widen participation in higher education in England. We proposed to adopt a very inclusive approach to evidence. Our experience in searching the literature was that there were no relevant trials – randomised or otherwise. If we had decided to exclude all other evidence, then our review would have been empty. Instead, we explained what the value of trials *would* have been in testing the ideas and theories generated by other kinds of work, and instead synthesised that other work. Our experience of this wider literature was that much was not research at all, and much was not described sufficiently to understand what the evidence presented was. Of the remaining studies, a high proportion produced conclusions that did not follow logically

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from their findings (indeed it was often difficult to separate the conclusions from the findings). We found no badge, such as outlet, institution or research reputation that could guarantee the conclusions.

Therefore, we explained clearly what each of these problems was to try and avoid misleading readers, and then included all of the evidence that was available, weighted according to its scale and quality. It is a kind of Bayesian synthesis. If we had excluded research on the grounds of quality, the result would have been the same as if we had excluded research on methods grounds – a very brief review. Yet, in doing the review in this way we were criticised by the funders for being generally critical of the work that we included. If we had simply excluded the work on methods or quality grounds, as is often done in traditional systematic reviews, then our section warning readers of the problems of quality would have needed less prominence. Our conclusion is still that we do not really know what works to widen participation. Perhaps it would have been simpler to have been more exclusive and so less overtly 'critical'. Reader - what *should* we do in the absence of trials?

Our thanks again to all who came and contributed to this discussion. However, we still want more people involved in face-to-face events, and in virtual participation, from all areas of public policy. In particular, we want to hear from national, regional and local policy-makers and practitioners who do or could use evidence from rigorous evaluations in their fields. And from research methods trainers, perhaps struggling with the place of trials methods in their courses. The first event was in York, but we are happy to hold or help organise events wherever they are wanted. Please contact us with your comments and suggestions.



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RCT Help Line

If you have a query or would like help or advice on any aspect of designing, running or evaluating randomised controlled trials, please contact us. Where appropriate, a member of the project will be happy to visit the site to provide personal assistance.

Contact Us:

Tel: 01904 433466 or
Email: educ-trials-pp@york.ac.uk

First Annual Conference

Randomised Controlled Trials in the Social Sciences: Challenges & Prospects, 13th–15th September 2006

Call for Abstracts

Abstracts are now invited for oral and poster presentations which present:

- ✧ Research into and about randomised controlled trials in the social sciences
- ✧ Examples of trials
- ✧ Methodology of trials, including caveats and concerns
- ✧ Dissemination of trials (e.g. Systematic Reviews of trials)

The purpose of each abstract is to allow the Academic Committee to make a judgement as to the suitability of the abstract for the conference and to provide conference delegates with information about the presentation/poster. All suitable abstracts will be included in a conference handbook.

Guidelines for abstract submission:

- ✧ Abstracts of research studies should follow a structured format – Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion
- ✧ Abstracts should be no longer than 250 words, excluding references
- ✧ Please use no more than three references

Please indicate your preference for presentation—Oral, Poster or No Preference

Please send submissions by 30th June 2006 to: The RDI Trials Project Administrator, Department of Educational Studies, University of York, Heslington, York YO10 5DD or you may email your submissions to the Administrator at educ-trials-pp@york.ac.uk.

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