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University of York

# Trials in Public Policy

## Project Update

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**Second project event: research trainers meeting**

This event took place in May and was well attended. The aim was to set up a 'working group' of 'research trainers' involved in research methods training across a range of subject specialisms. The attendees represented a variety of Higher Education and Research Institutions and subject areas (e.g. criminal justice, social policy, statistics). There were lively discussions about some of the specific problems currently preventing the full inclusion of training in RCT methods in research methods courses, and possible ways of overcoming these problems, including the role of policy makers in this process. Dr Robert Coe presented a session on the power of successful trials, and Dr Carole Torgerson led a discussion on the feasibility of pragmatic trials. The final discussion of the day focused on setting up of smaller 'working groups' to take the work of this strand of the project forward. Examples of working groups include: developing a model course and web-based resources.

**First annual conference, 13th-15th September 2006 (run jointly by the York trials Methods Group and the RDI project): update**

The closing date for receipt of abstracts to the first conference on "Randomised Controlled Trials in the Social Sciences: Challenges and Prospect" has now passed. We are pleased to say that we had a large number of abstracts of high quality. These have now been prioritised and the presenting authors have been contacted. As well as interesting oral presentations we have also accepted a number of poster presentations. Abstracts accepted for oral presentations include descriptions of completed trials in criminal justice, education and employment. Included presentations will describe a range of exciting trials and methodological issues relating to social science trials. The main conference will be preceded by two workshops on cluster randomised trials—led by Professor Martin Bland—and systematic reviews of randomised trials –led by Dr Carole Torgerson.

***Places are still available at both the conference and the workshops.***

*Carole Torgerson and Stephen Gorard*

**A CONSORT statement for the social sciences**

Historically, reporting of health care trials has tended to be weak. To remedy this deficit many leading medical journals have adopted the CONSORT statement (see http://www.consort-statement.org/) which requires the authors of RCTs to report key methodological characteristics of their trials in order for the reader to make an informed judgement as to the quality of the RCT. Methodological work looking at RCTs in education has also found that the reporting of these tends to be weak *(Torgerson *et al,* 2005). Some psychological journals have adopted the CONSORT statement for RCTs in psychology. However, the original CONSORT statement was devised for pharmaceutical trials. Therefore, some of the items included in the statement may not be appropriate for non-pharmacological and social science trials. Consequently, one aim of the systematic review workshop on the first day of the conference (13th September) will be to look at ways of modifying the CONSORT guidance so that it is appropriate for the reporting of social science trials. The workshop will include a presentation from Isabelle Boutron, a French health care researcher, who has been involved in work adapting the CONSORT statement to non-pharmacological trials in health care.

*Torgerson, C.J., Torgerson, D.J., Birks, Y. F., Porthouse, J. (2005) *A comparison of the quality of randomised controlled trials in education and health*, British Educational Research Journal, 35(1).

**Top Trial Tips**

*Stephen Gorard*

What follows is the first in what we hope will be a regular feature, where participants in the project share what they consider to be 'top tips' for those of us conducting trials. We would be happy to receive suggestions for such tips from readers (please email your suggested tip and your contact details to educ-trials-pp@york.ac.uk). Tips can be about anything to do with trials from negotiating access through ethical issues to dealing with missing data in analysis or converting the results into policy or practice. Tips can be anything to avoid for beginners, or, as with this first example, something that even relatively experienced researchers may not have thought of.

**Increased power for very little cost**

*David Torgerson*

It is almost automatic when randomising participants or clusters to different treatments within a trial to try and have the same number of cases in each treatment group—a 1:1 allocation ratio of intervention to control group. This tradition has grown up because a 1:1 ratio, for any given sample size, usually ensures maximum statistical power— where 'power' is the likelihood of correctly finding a difference between the groups for a given effect size. However, where there are resource shortages limiting the number of cases that can be offered the intervention treatment, then power can be increased by randomly allocating more participants to the control group and increasing the total sample size.

For example, we might only have sufficient resources to offer an intervention to 50 participants. If we used equal allocation then our sample size is constrained to 100 participants. However, if we set the allocation ratio to 2:1 then we can randomise 150 participations, with 100 in the control group and 50 in the intervention group. By doing this we will get more statistical power than if we had simply used equal allocation and had a total sample size of only 100, but at little or not cost when the control group simply receive 'normal' treatment anyway. We can set the allocation ratio as high as we wish, although once it exceeds 3:1 then the extra increase in power tends to be slight and it may not be worth the effort of following up a much larger sample size. In summary, increasing size of the control group in this way we can give **increased power for very little cost.**

Of course, if the *total* sample size is constrained then using unequal allocation will reduce power—although not by much unless the ratio exceeds 2:1. For example, in a trial of 100 participants if we allocated 32 to one group and 68 to the other the decline in power is only 5% compared with the situation where we put 50 in each group. This loss of power might be worthwhile if we can make considerable resource savings.

## 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

Our thanks again to all who came and contributed to our research trainers meeting in May. However, we want to encourage more people to be 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 two events were 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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**Please note that for the conference in September, the contact person is:**

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# First Annual Conference

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

The conference is a 3-day event including optional work shops on the afternoon of the 13th September discussing cluster-randomised trials and systematic reviews of randomised controlled trials. There will then follow 2 days of papers with keynote speeches by Professor Thomas Cook (Northwestern University, USA) and Dr Philip Davies (Government Social Research Unit, UK) The conference includes a research poster session.

A summary of the programme with the list provisional presenters are given below:

### Thursday 14th September

*Opening Keynote address (Professor Thomas Cook)*
Empirical estimates of the marginal advantage of conducting randomised clinical trials: results from experiments and non-experiments on the same topic in education and job training

*Dr Barbara Sianesi*
Randomisation bias and post-randomisation selection bias in RCTs: The role of non-experimental methods in ERA demonstration

*Dr Richard Dorsett*
Mandating full New Deal participation for the over-50s: an experimental analysis

*Kevin Marsh*
Value for money: how to design RCTs to ensure their compatibility with economic evaluation

*Jacque Mallender (invited speaker)*
Criteria for assessing the feasibility of RCTs: correctional services –a case study

*Peter John*
How different are telephoning and canvassing? Results from a GOTV field experiment in the UK 2005 General Election

*Prof Sheila Bird*
Issues in the design of criminal justice trials

*Prof Greg Brooks*
A trial investigating whether a financial incentive would affect the attainment and/or attendance of adult literacy learners

*Dr Nick Axford*
RCTs in Children's services in the UK: history and prospects

*Dr Robert Coe (invited speaker)*
Academic mentoring in schools: a small RCT to evaluate a large policy

### Friday 15th September

*Dr Jonathan Green (invited speaker)*
Studying process in randomised trials of complex interventions

*DWP—symposium*
Testing labour market policy interventions using random assignment: A central Government Department's experience

*Prof Laurence Moore (invited speaker)*
Cluster randomised trials of schools-based health interventions

*Dr Claudine Crane*
Early intervention for children with language difficulties : an evaluation of two school-based intervention programmes

*Dr Nina Biehal*
A randomised controlled trial in children's social services setting: challenges and complexities

*Dr Celia Brown*
Opportunities for evaluation using the Stepped Wedge trial design

*Dr James Middleton (invited speaker)*
Comparing the design experimental approach

*Dr Jane Clarbour*
Overcoming problems associated with the utilisation of randomised controlled trials in forensic settings

*Dr Paul Marchant*
Difficulties in analysing non-randomised trials and ways forward

*Closing keynote address (Dr Phillip Davies)*
Randomised controlled trials in social science: a public policy perspective