Many things can come to mind when reflecting on what addictions are; the thoughts arising can range from pleasurable to painful, can touch on political to economic and health implications, from biological factors to different lifestyles. Addictions are multidimensional issues and the ways in which different societies conceive and implement their answers to them can vary greatly. If we take, for example, a realistic assessment of the costs and benefits of the current drug policies in contemporary Europe, we find that many of them are associated with large societal and economic costs and have failed to have an impact on the harms brought about by addictions. ALICE RAP, a five year European Commission FP7 co-financed research project, starting 1st April 2011, aims to provide scientific evidence to inform and reframe the public dialogue and to stimulate a broad debate on current and alternative approaches to addictions. Bringing together scientists from more than 30 countries and 29 different scientific disciplines, ALICE RAP is divided into seven areas and twenty one work packages through an integrated multidisciplinary research strategy. Area 3 will investigate the determinants of addiction to better understand the initiation, transition into problem use and transition into and out of dependence. Area 3 is coordinated by Dr. Petra Meier from the University of Sheffield.

1. The tale of ‘the elephant and the blind men’ (or, what Area 3 is going to do)

For much of the past three decades, studies on the determinants of addiction have been conducted by many different disciplines (e.g., neurobiology, psychology, economy, medicine, policy research, among others). Such research is contributing to great advances in our understanding of addictions. However, we are still very like the men in the tale of “The elephant and the blind men”: Each man touches one part of the animal but none captures “the whole picture”. The lack of interdisciplinary collaboration has meant that the evidence on how genetic, neurobiological, psychological and macro-level psycho-social and environmental influences interact has been slow to emerge. Area 3 proposes to make a stepped-change in our thinking about the determinants of addiction, developing a new integrated theory for the three main transition areas:

WP7 – Potentially risky substance use / behaviour.
WP8 - Harmful use / behaviour’ will be studied.
WP9 – Chronic relapse, cessation and recovery.
2. The partnership approach (Area 3 integration with the other areas)

Area 3 sets out a challenge to produce interdisciplinary, integrated, evidence reviews, with the aim of avoiding single disciplinary silos. Following the same idea, Area 3 as a whole will have strong interdependencies with Area 6, addicting the young, when considering determinants of young people’s use of addictive substances and behaviours and how best to promote resilience amongst the young.

Moreover, Area 3 will be synergistic with Area 2, Counting Addictions, in classification and the quantification of transition stage probabilities.

Area 3 also has synergies with Area 4, Business of Addiction and Area 5, Governance of Addiction, as both areas are likely to deal with macro-level factors that determine both the likelihoods and speeds of transitions between non-use, use, problem use, addiction, and cessation.

3. The interdisciplinary elephant map

Definitions of what constitutes normal versus addicted behaviour have undergone considerable change over the past 50 years and the debate is ongoing. Likewise, the determinants of what is termed ‘addicted behaviour’ are neither clear nor well-understood. For example, why do some people naturally abstain from addictive behaviours altogether; what allows some to engage in such behaviours without developing problems; and, why do others experience very serious difficulties?

Area 3 includes comprehensive, interdisciplinary, integrated evidence reviews, based on expert colloquia, concerning the individual and societal influences that determine addiction trajectories. The findings from Area 3 will contribute to understanding those trajectories, providing integrated, interactive maps that can be navigated to show the strengths of the determinants and interactions, and reframing our understanding of addictions.
Area 3 and its three WPs (7, 8 and 9) will investigate the determinants of addiction to better understand the initiation, transition into problem use and transition into and out of dependence. It is coordinated by Prof Petra Meier from the University of Sheffield.

1. Determinants of transitions in substance use and gambling (or what WPs 7, 8 and 9 are going to do)

WP7 – ‘Potentially risky substance use / behaviour’ - coordinated by the Area 3 leader, Dr. Petra Meier from the University of Sheffield.

WP8 - ‘Harmful use / behaviour’ will be studied –coordinated by Dr. Gerhard Buehringer of the Dresden Technische Universitat.

WP9 – ‘Chronic relapse, cessation and recovery’ - coordinated by Professor David Nutt from Imperial College, London.

For these three main transition stages, the WPs aim to develop agreed definitions for substance use and gambling, and to obtain estimates for the transition probabilities from non-use to use, to problem use and addiction, as well as to natural cessation/recovery. We will seek to determine the role of the full range of micro- and macro-level determinants of addictions, synthesising evidence held in different disciplines about the predictors of onset of use and problem use and producing an up-to-date comprehensive interdisciplinary evidence review on these issues. From an interdisciplinary perspective, we aim to generate testable models of the onset and cessation of use and problem use and gambling that can form the basis for future research.