

2nd European Symposium on Economics of Education

**Reference to presentation of Stephen Machin
“Efficiency and Equity in European
Education and Training Systems”**

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Evaluations of educational interventions: Efficiency versus equity

Introduction

Before going into more detail in the presentation of Stephen Machin, I first want to point out some general remarks from the point of view of a policy maker.

General remarks

To me as policy advisor, the appeal of this symposium lies in the link between evidence and practice, which should form the basis of policy. My message is: “Let practice prove policy right and wrong.”

Of course as policy makers we need to look for evidence that our measures are really working. But it's just as important to learn from things that go wrong. For this we need good experiments as part of the policy process. They are essential if we are to put taxpayers' money to good use.

Unfortunately, that's easier said than done. In the Netherlands, practice at schools and universities doesn't yet involve much evidence-based policy research, or EBPR. I know that other countries have made more progress. So it is good that we have got together here, to exchange experiences and learn from one another. In the Netherlands, we still have to get to grips with concepts like evidence and randomised experiments, and their importance for policy.

One factor holding us back is that studies of this kind do not always produce the results we want. So they meet with resistance. We're human beings, after all, and we like to be proved right.

Let me give an example. In the 1990s we set aside a lot of money to equip schools and colleges with computers. At the time, we didn't really know what the exact impact would be, and this was not properly researched at the outset. I think that people were frightened that they wouldn't like the findings. What would we have done if studies had shown that using computers would not improve pupils' performance? After all, teachers were convinced of the need for them. And pupils and parents would have thought a school without computers impossibly behind the times.

We need to be aware of these dilemmas. Researchers as well as policymakers and teachers must realise that evidence-based policy research takes time. It's rather like a fine wine. It has to mature. Politicians, too, will have to be patient, and that's not easy in a world where only the hottest issues matter.

Let's use the coming years to find out how we can best link EBPR to practice. The longer we take, the better the results will be. I believe that evidence can only be linked to practice if all parties keep to the following rules:

- Researchers must research the right questions, after talking to policymakers and people in the field. They then need to draw clear, comprehensible conclusions.
- Policymakers must be open to the findings, and be able to understand them and translate them into concrete measures.

- Teachers must be open to new insights, and be given the means to apply them in practice.

Gradually our ministry takes steps of making EBPR a factor in Dutch education. Let me give you two examples.

1. Our ministry has launched three different experiments to investigate the impact and possibilities of an open system in higher education.
2. We are also looking at the possibility of financial incentives for students opting to study science or technology. These are serious experiments using the gold standard of randomised groups.

I see these activities as long-term investments. As you know, that goes against the grain in politics, where people tend to want a quick fix. But if it takes more time to find out what we need to know, then so be it. The goal – a policy that works for teachers, pupils and students – is certainly worth it.

Remarks related to presentation Machin

Let me now make some remarks related to the presentation of Stephen. First of all I want to mention that I from a theoretical point of view fully subscribe the 3 general issues he pointed out. Moreover the different kind of methods and the 2 examples that he discussed were very practical and therefore very interesting for a policy advisor like me. Finally I take this opportunity to raise some questions to Stephen:

1. Personally I find the approach to precise impact as well as the value of the outcome of policy interventions very ambitious. Do you think

that this approach is realistic in practice? Or is it better to start on a more gradually way for example by précising impact on outcomes of the policy intervention first?

2. In line with the former question. To what extent can the value of the policy interventions be determined and are they not too sensitive to the assumptions that you make?
3. With reference to the NLP. In which way is the method that you use depending of the outcomes of the effectivly of a policy intervention. And which method do you prefer?
4. Which role do you see for us and in particular for the EU commission to bring the notions that you mentioned in your presentation in practice? Do we for example have to put up a database or a virtual clearing house in a way that we can exchange good practices?