

The foundation strengthens its support for social mobility

 JULIEN GRENET, Co-head of the new research chair in Education Policy and social Mobility at the Paris School of Economics

My name is Julien Grenet I'm a senior researcher at the French CNRS national research centre, and I'm also an Associate Professor of Economics at the Paris School of Economics, and Deputy Director of the Institut des politiques publiques, which is located at the Paris School of Economics. The Paris School of Economics or PSE is one of the leading economics departments in Europe, it's also among the top five in the world. And in particular it has a strong group of researchers working on education policies.

This new research chair in education policy and social mobility has been created by the Ardian Foundation in partnership with the Paris School of Economics and the DEPP which is the statistical department of the French Ministry of Education. So DEPP is the arm of the French Ministry of Education and is charged with measuring the quality of education policies and initiatives.

It will give the researchers at PSE access to its extensive datasets for future projects. This partnership is going to allow us to make a lot of progress on understanding education policies in France. None of the existing chairs covers topics related to education and social mobility, so this chair will give us a unique opportunity to improve our understanding of the causes of unequal access to education, and the chair will also help us to identify policies and actions that we think are the most effective to reduce these inequalities and hence to promote social mobility.

Chapter 1 - UNDER-RESEARCHED AREAS

So as one of the project's leaders I intend to cover a wide range of topics, to look at children from their pre-school years to the time when they leave education and enter the labour market. So within this broad scope, me and my colleagues intend to pay specific attention to two areas that have been relatively under-researched in France.

The first area of critical importance is early childhood education. A large body of research has shown that early childhood is the time when education can have the most significant impact on a child's future development. But unfortunately this important topic has been rather neglected in France. We hope to fill this gap by taking advantage of our partnership with the Ardian Foundation, which is currently expanding its support for younger children in primary and pre-primary education. And we think we can also benefit greatly from the partnership with DEPP by gaining access to some of the tools that the Ministry of Education has developed over the years to measure children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

A second important area for the chair will be the transition from education to the labour market. A major difficulty that researchers have encountered in studying these transitions was that until recently it was not possible to link education data with data on earnings and employment. And this is very unfortunate because in France we have fantastic data on education on the one hand, but also great data on the labour markets. We are confident that through our relationship with DEPP we'll be able to make significant progress on this front.

One of the most ambitious projects that we plan to carry out is to match education data with data on earnings and employment, using new encryption technologies to preserve the confidentiality of the data of course. This will allow us to find out what happens when children leave the education system and how well they perform on the labour market.

Our first initiative has been to launch a call for research projects among the junior and senior members of the chair. We've received many exciting proposals and we've selected four projects that cover a wide range of policy-relevant topics and all stages of education. These projects concern the effects of different types of childcare provision on children's cognitive development. A second project will focus on urban renovation and on social mixing in schools. Some researchers will also work on the long-run effects on boarding schools, these experimental boarding schools that have been created in France while looking at the effects on low-income students' academic attainment in the long run.

And finally there will be some research on the under-representation of female students in scientific field of study, in the context of prep classes for French engineering schools.

As you know 2020 has been extremely challenging for students due to the public health crisis. We will also launch a call for funding to grant an extra year of funding to PhD students who work in the field of education and who are in the final stages of their PhD at PSE.

Chapitre 2 - **PHILANTHROPY IN EDUCATION**

I believe that philanthropy can make a big difference in the field of education. Today, education is the second most supported sector by foundations, after health. Philanthropic organizations are playing an increasingly important role, both to improve the quality of education, but also to promote greater equity in educational opportunities around the world.

That's especially true in the United States where organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and they've become key players in the education sector by funding research in schools in disadvantaged areas, by launching a large number of initiatives to improve teacher effectiveness. So I believe that the chair that has been created by the Ardian Foundation can make a difference, especially in France and that it can help to improve the quality of education and promote a more equitable access to education. I think there are several channels through which this can be done. First by funding innovative approaches to improve the quality of education, second by promoting rigorous impact evaluation in the field of education and by making progress on the methods to evaluate.

I also think that our partnership with Ardian can help build a knowledge base that can raise awareness of policy-makers on the most effective means to improve educational policies and finally I believe that philanthropic organizations such as the Ardian Foundation can help to shape large-scale initiatives by co-investing with other donors and other foundations to support investment in education.

Chapter 3 - THE KEY TO SOCIAL MOBILITY

Research in economics has shown that education is one of the key determiners, social mobility being the extent to which socioeconomic success passes from one generation to the next. This connection between education and social mobility has been very well documented in the US. Recent studies by Raj Chetty and his co-authors found that independently of their parents' income, children's economic opportunities are heavily shaped by the neighbourhoods in which they grow up. In other words, children whose parents are at the lower end of the income distribution tend to move up in the income ladder in some locations, but make little progress in other locations.

This evidence has led researchers to investigate whether these differences in social mobility across locations could be explained in the differences in the quality of public education. And the answer is yes. The availability of high-quality public education is a key determinant for upward mobility for children of low-income families.

However there are many questions that remain to be answered. What literature has convincingly shown is that some schools are better than others at improving students' performance and this in turn improves the equality of opportunity across generations.

What is less well understood is how alternative policies compare in terms of their effectiveness to improve the quality of schooling.

Should we decrease class size? Should we improve the training of teachers? Should we increase teachers' salaries? Should we provide more transparent information to students? Should we increase financial aid? These are the fundamental questions we wish to explore through the chair in the coming years.

The study we recently published on the French Grandes Écoles takes advantage of the very rich administrative data to document the extent of inequality in access to these elite institutions. It rans three dimensions: students' socioeconomic backgrounds, students' geographic origins, and also their gender.

Our study has revealed that inequalities with respect to access to Grandes École are much larger than was previously thought. In particular concerning the geographic dimension. To give you just one figure: only 3% of French students come from Paris. But Parisians represent 25% of students from the most prestigious Grandes Écoles in France such as Ecole Polytechnique or HEC or Ecole Normale Supérieur.

So our study shows that talented students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds face major obstacles to get into Grandes Écoles.

This research has received a lot of media coverage, it has attracted the attention of policy makers. We've been contacted by government officials, by representatives of Grandes Écoles and also by associations that try to promote more social diversity in these elite institutions.

Our study discusses a number of policy options that we think could help to achieve greater equity in access to these Grandes Écoles. One of the options is to have outreach campaigns targeted at talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These proposals have triggered the interest of policy makers and we hope that they can soon be translated into action and that these actions can be evaluated.

Chapter 4 - LEARNING FROM COVID IMPACTS

School closures due to the COVID pandemic left almost a billion students out of school around the world, and that has had dramatic consequences in terms of educational inequalities. So there is a lot of research going on at the moment to try to quantify the effects of these closures on children and adolescents, especially among the more vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. The research has identified several channels through which school closures can affect child development. The first channel of course is the effect of suspending in-person teaching and replacing it with online education, which is only an imperfect substitute for in-person teaching. But also a second channel is a change in the learning environment for children, and the psychological consequences of losing contact with their friends.

And finally school closures can affect children's development because of different responses by parents. Not all parents have the same rules to replace the inputs that are provided by the teachers.

So although we only have a very incomplete picture of the consequences of the pandemic on education, we have more and more evidence from several countries, especially in Europe that all point to large negative effects on learning, with pupils in 2020 making two to four months less progress than similar pupils in previous years. Available evidence from the UK or from Belgium or Holland further suggest that pupils from low-income families have been impacted significantly more than students from high-income families.

There is a growing body of research on the use and effects of digital tools in education and the effects on students' achievement. However I must say that no consensus has been reached yet on the effects of these tools. Existing studies in fact provide conflicting answers to this question. Actually an important insight from research into digital tools in education is that simply providing students with access to technology is not enough. It has limited impacts on learning outcomes, but of course it does improve computer proficiency but we are interested in learning outcomes. The use of digital tools in education will be an important area of research for the new chair. The pandemic has shown that digital learning is not a substitute for in-person learning, so we have to be careful how we use these tools.

And one of the goals of the chair will be precisely to evaluate how to make the best use of these tools.

In France, as in many other countries, an important difficulty to quantify the consequences of the pandemic on students' learning is the fact that most written exams and tests were cancelled in 2020. Which means that we currently lack the relevant data to provide a precise assessment of what happened in France.

Fortunately the DEPP and the Ministry of Education has been conducting an intense survey in French schools to find out how pupils, students and teachers have been affected by the nationwide school closures that took place last year.

As part of our partnership with the Ministry of Education, we look forward to taking advantages of this survey to better understand the short-term and long-run implications of the pandemic on education. So in the short-run we would like to document the consequences of the pandemic on students' learning outcomes, as well as on the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils. And we will also explore possible solutions like remedial programs targeted at low-performing children. And in the longer run we will analyze the consequences of the pandemic on students' educational pathways, and we will have a particular focus on students in higher education who are entering a job market which is devastated by the COVID crisis.

We really plan to take advantage of the partnership to make the best use of education and labour market data to allow us to track students from the time they enter secondary education to the time they exit higher education and enter the labour market. By comparing these students to previous generations, previous cohorts, we'll be able to precisely measure the consequences of the pandemic for their insertion on the labour market, and therefore think of potential solutions in terms of training, in terms of assistance to improve their future outcomes.

Of course these questions are going to be on the agenda for decades to come, so I think it's a good time to launch these projects. It's also a great opportunity to draw on the lessons we are learning now, not just for health, but also for education, as this pandemic won't likely be the last one.