

Rigorous Impact Evaluation in Europe

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In 2018, the University of Maryland, the Collegio Carlo Alberto, and *Evaluation Review*, in association with the International Network for Social Policy Teaching and Research, cosponsored a conference on rigorous impact evaluation in Europe. Held in Torino, Italy, the conference honored Professor Alberto P. Martini of the Università del Piemonte Orientale and his efforts to advance the rigorous evaluation of social programs in Italy and in Europe more broadly.

A total of twenty-six papers were presented and nine keynote talks were given. About fifty people attended, most of whom were public policy or economics professors. Other attendees represented the Italian Senate, European and American research firms/centers, and various cross-national or international organizations (e.g., the European Commission, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, and the United Nations Children's Fund). Attendees came from Austria, Italy, the UK, and the US.

In continental Europe, the use of rigorous counterfactuals to evaluate the effects of social programs and policies is not as common as it is in the US or the UK. In fact, both the European Union and most national governments often rely on qualitative methods, such as customer satisfaction studies or provider opinions, to judge the quality and effects of interventions.

Attitudes and practices are changing in Europe, however, as signaled by the awarding of both the 2019 and 2020 Nobel Memorial Prizes in Economic Sciences to groups of scholars who have devoted their careers to rigorous program evaluation. In keeping with these developments, many of the conference papers reported the results of original, rigorous quantitative impact evaluations, that is, evaluations with an explicit counterfactual, using either experimental or quasi-experimental methods. Other papers covered the relation between rigorous evaluation and policy, systematic reviews and meta-analyses, and methodological issues regarding rigorous impact evaluation.

Eight of the conference papers were subsequently selected for publication in *Evaluation Review*, using its usual peer review process:

- “Using Iterative Experimentation to Accelerate Program Improvement: A Case Example” by Rebecca Maynard, University of Pennsylvania;
- “Repetita Iuvant? A Repeated RCT on the Effectiveness of an At-scale Teacher Professional Development Program” by Andrea Caputo, University of Rome; Giovanni Abbiati, Bruno Kessler Foundation; Gianluca Argentin, Università Cattolica del Sacro

Cuore; and Aline Pennisi, Central Budget Authority, Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance;

- “The Effectiveness of a Formal Financial Education Program at Primary Schools and the Role of Informal Financial Education” by Flavia Coda Moscarola, Compagnia di San Paolo and Collegio Carlo Alberto; and Adriaan Kalwij, Utrecht University;
- “Do Start-Up Subsidies for the Unemployed Affect Participants’ Well-Being? A Rigorous Look at (Un-)Intended Consequences of Labor Market Policies” by Marco Caliendo, University of Potsdam;
- “When Non-Compliance Carries the Day. Evaluating the Effectiveness of an Employment Program for the Severely Mentally Ill” by Alberto Martini, Università del Piemonte Orientale; Enrico Rettore, Università di Padova; Gian Paolo Barbetta, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore; and Fabio Sandrolini, ASVAPP.
- “Does the Running Variable Matter? A Second Look at Discontinuity Designs for Evaluating Regional Economic Development and Business Incentive Policies” by Daniele Bondonio, Università del Piemonte Orientale;
- “The Impact on Job Quality of Firm-level Support to Innovation: Evidence from Natural Experiment conditions and Linked Employer-Employee Data in Portugal” by Daniele Bondonio, Università del Piemonte Orientale; and
- “Treatment Effect Heterogeneity,” by Jeffrey Smith, University of Wisconsin.

While conducting rigorous evaluations for policy and program planning is a continuing challenge, both the conference and these papers illustrate the utility and mutual benefits of international exchanges among academics and practitioners. On both sides of the Atlantic, such cross-fertilization should be encouraged.

[*Published in Evaluation Review in July 2022*](#)