



# "PRIORITY EDUCATION CONVENTIONS" (CEP): PROGRAM AT SCIENCES PO

## Education Policies Research Group

### Co-directors:

Denis FOUGÈRE  
Agnès VAN ZANTEN

### Project members:

Agnès van ZANTEN  
Germán FERNÁNDEZ VAVRIK  
Filippo PIRONE  
Marta DOS SANTOS SILVA  
and with the participation of Christophe BIROLINI, intern and student at the Ecole Centrale of Paris  
**Previous Research:**

This research follows up on the work conducted by A. van Zanten since 2006 on the training of elites and social openness policies.

This research also incorporates the findings of G. Fernández Vavrik's research on affirmative action policies in higher education in Argentina (Fernández Vavrik, 2014) and the work of F. Pirone on the mechanisms for "dropouts" and good students (Pirone and Rayou, 2012).

It is also in line with the study led by A. van Zanten and requested by Sciences Po on the implementation of the CEP system in partner schools.

*This research focuses on the evaluation of the "Priority Education Conventions" (CEP) program based on an analysis of the backgrounds and experiences of students admitted to Sciences Po through this procedure. CEP aims to expand access in selective education to disadvantaged upper secondary students who, by their emblematic character, deserve to be the subject of a systematic independent evaluation. The research aims to explore the dynamics of the partnering upper secondary schools and at Sciences Po through the institutional monitoring of students and their preparation / adaptation to the pedagogical expectations of higher education and the role of socialization between peers.*

## Research contributions

At the conceptual level, the project aims to contribute to the development of an approach to the evaluation of education, higher education and equal opportunities policies, with emphasis on:

- The implementation of the programs within institutions, and in particular the way in which specific mechanisms are integrated into the ordinary institutional operation, and the way various institutional actors interpret these mechanisms and their supporting role.
- The perspectives of the participants and their notions evolve following their temporal transition in the program and are differentiated according to the more or less satisfactory character of their backgrounds and their experiences.

In addition to the preceding points, at the political and pedagogical level the project aims to make recommendations, enabling institutional officials to increase the effectiveness of this policy and to reduce its shortcomings or its perverse effects.

## Theoretical and methodological framework

Existing literature on this and other social open-mindedness programs have focused mainly on the design and the push for these policies by the directors of the *grandes écoles*. From the students' point of view, the literature has focused on the challenges encountered in terms of social integration (Lambert 2010, Soubiron 2010, Allouch 2013, Pasquali 2014). The distinctiveness of the current research is due in particular to its focus on pedagogical obstacles, which are linked to expectations and the institutional offerings in this area, and which CEP students encounter compared to other students.

The research is mainly ethnographic and includes analysis of pedagogical documents, interviews with different types of actors and students, observations of workshops and courses. It will also include an analysis of statistical data on students' academic paths.

## Key issues

### 1) Curriculum "gaps"

We will try to understand the difficulties encountered by the CEP students, assuming important differences exist between their backgrounds and their past and present curricular experiences. We will also compare the differences in the students' preparation for higher education according to the upper secondary school they attended.

### 2) Peer groups

The research also examines how relationships (past peer groups and new peer groups made at Sciences Po) can affect students' academic engagement and their perceptions of higher education, Sciences Po, and elite educational pathways.

### 3) Institutional monitoring

A third type of questions concerns the forms of institutional monitoring implemented by Sciences Po (teachers, administrative staff) with regard to students in the CEP program, and the degree to which they know and take advantage of the services offered to them.



## Results from 2016: preparation at Sciences Po

An ethnographic study of the operation of the CEP workshops was realized in four upper secondary schools in the Academies of Versailles and Créteil. The study was focused on the pedagogical framework used in the CEP workshops. We show that the assessments of the CEP program do not only regulate the schedule, the contents, and the types of activity proposed to students, but also the pedagogical relationships which are established in the workshops.

In the preparation for CEP assessments, most teachers combine instrumental and expressive aims. The first concerns the eligibility test and corresponds to the mastery of a considerable share of school-age and scholarly competences, as well as the ability to synthesize, articulate and recall them. The latter is oriented towards admission, and takes into account the students' original and eclectic "personality" and its link to the institution's expectations. The concern of CEP students to pass CEP exams is, according to many teachers, complimented by a more general concern of students' empowerment, which is acquired through academic and cultural knowledge and psychosocial skills or soft skills such as charisma or open-mindedness.

Other less explicit objectives are also pursued within the CEP workshops. Among them, ad hoc guidance is implemented for each student according to his or potential and is achieved through "anticipated socialization" and "internalization of the probable". There is also the aim to fight against self-censorship which is typical of this type of student population and is addressed through the development of "positive pedagogy" or "reinforcement". Additional objectives include a modification of students' relationship to knowledge in order to develop their critical thinking skills, and the acquisition of perseverance in learning and in the production of knowledge.

To do this, teachers put in place diversified pedagogical supports, reconfigured traditional disciplinary curricula, alternating frontal transmission, collective and individualized support, workshop model, student autonomy regarding their work on site and at home, cultural visits, meetings with partners of varied status, etc. The pedagogical climate established within the CEP workshops is also characterized by its conviviality (within the limits of meeting work expectations) and the horizontality in the pedagogical relationships between peers and between teachers and students.

In terms of success, of the 64 students enrolled in the workshops that we observed, slightly more than half passed the eligibility test in their high schools and only 14% were admitted to Sciences Po. These outcomes are in line with those observed over the period 2001-2009.

## Activities in 2017: success at Sciences Po

The qualitative component of the study included observations of lecture courses and conferences. Interviews with first-year students and their teachers were also conducted. The aim of this work was to understand the curricular proposals and pedagogical practices of teachers, both CEP and non-CEP student participation, and student interactions with their peers and their professors. The thirty student interviews were conducted using a detailed interview guide. The questions were structured around three themes: students' academic experience from when they began Sciences Po, their experiences related to the course observed and more broadly to their second semester studies, and, finally, their high school career and their future plans. The questions for the teaching staff concerned the contents of the courses, the teaching methods and the evaluation methods. Another part of the study consisted of conducting interviews with officials of the university college and the "Equal opportunities and diversity" division of Sciences Po.

The statistical component of the study aims to compare the paths of CEP and non-CEP students from when they apply to Sciences Po until they enter the labor market. To do so, the current study is based on data made available by various Sciences Po departments and services, in particular admission, schooling, careers, equal opportunities, and diversity. The analysis of the data will aim to identify similarities and differences in the trajectories of students using a number of significant variables.