Introduction – Evaluation of Public Policies
A Selection of Papers Presented at the 9th Annual Conference on Public Policy Evaluation, Hosted by the AFSE and the Directorate General of the Treasury

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That evaluating public policy is a democratic duty can no longer be in doubt. Indeed, in France it is a constitutional obligation: Article 15 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen states that "society has the right to hold to account any public agent of its administration." Necessity aside, however, the issue of how to convincingly evaluate public policy remains a fraught question. The challenge is not simply to observe what happens when a new policy is put in place. The real task is to compare the observed situation with what would have happened if that policy (and only that policy) had never been introduced, the so-called "counterfactual" scenario. The complexity arises from the fact that this counterfactual scenario is, by definition, not observed. The evaluation of public policy thus poses formidable methodological challenges, since counterfactual scenarios require modelling, a practice which is inherently debatable and open to criticism.

Although the evaluation of public policy and its attendant methodological challenges are not limited to the sphere of economic policy, evaluating governments' economic policies has nonetheless become both a fertile field of economic research and an essential requirement for the administration of those same economic policies. With this in mind, the French Economic Association (AFSE, *Association Française de Science Économique*) and the Directorate General of the French Treasury (*Direction générale du Trésor*) joined forces in 2015 to co-host an annual conference on the evaluation of public policy. Every year the conference selects papers on various aspects of public policy evaluation, with submissions assessed against two key criteria: academic excellence, and relevance to the administration of economic policy in France.

In 2023, in agreement with the editors of the journal, the organisers encouraged the authors of the papers presented at this 9th conference to submit their contributions for publication in *Economie et Statistique / Economics and Statistics*. The two articles included in this dossier are the fruit of this partnership.

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In the first of these articles, entitled "The Macroeconomic Effects of the Energy Price Cap: An Evaluation Conducted Using the ThreeME Multisectoral Model", **Paul Malliet and Anissa Saumtally** set out to analyse the impact of the energy price cap introduced in France in response to soaring global energy prices linked to the rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic and the international sanctions imposed in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To do so, they make use of a computable general equilibrium model known as ThreeME. The originality of this model resides partly in its multisectoral scope, but also in its capacity to provide a finely detailed representation of energy flows within the economy. Last but not least, ThreeME is a "neo-Keynesian" model wherein prices do not instantaneously adjust to maintain market equilibrium. All of these features allow for very detailed analysis of price trends and the repercussions of price shocks from one industry to another. The authors conclude that the price cap appears to have cushioned the impact of global shocks on domestic energy prices by an amount equivalent to 0.2% of GDP in 2022 and 0.4% in 2023, compared to a reference scenario with no price cap. However, the cost of the measure to the French national budget is estimated to have been somewhere in the region of 0.5% and 0.7% of GDP for 2022 and 2023 respectively.

In the second article, entitled "The Distance Between Occupations, and Post-training Professional Transitions for Jobseekers", **Kevin Michael Frick, Yagan Hazard, Damien Mayaux and Thomas Zuber** set out to evaluate the extent to which the vocational training opportunities available to unemployed people actually succeed in attenuating the structural imbalances between the skills held by jobseekers and the skills required by occupations, especially for the occupations for which recruitment shortages are the most important. With this objective in mind, the authors adopted a methodology which we found to be particularly innovative. Their strategy is based on comparisons of real examples of occupational transition by jobseekers (who had previously been in stable employment in a different occupation), some of whom had received vocational training and some of whom had not. The authors sought to ascertain whether or not access to vocational training facilitates the redistribution of manpower towards sectors experiencing recruitment shortages.

In order to achieve this goal, they began by constructing an indicator capable of measuring the skill gap between two occupations. They then used this tool to measure, for each jobseeker in the sample, the distance between their previous occupation and the occupation which they took up when returning to employment. The methodological originality of their study owes much to their use of a machine learning technique involving a neural network. They began by training the model to characterize almost four million job offers posted on the Pôle Emploi website, through a vector identifying twenty core characteristics. The difference between two occupations could thus be represented in geometric terms, by the angular distance between the two vectors as well as the norm for those vectors. Using this measurement tool, the authors were able to estimate – for each individual case of a jobseeker who previously held a stable post and later returned to work in a new profession – the distance between the old and the new occupations.

In order to estimate the impact of vocational training, the authors compared the career trajectories of jobseekers who had undergone training and jobseekers who were similar in terms of other observable characteristics, but had not received training. Instead of resorting to a familiar method such as propensity score matching, the authors made use of a more flexible method called *Double Debiased Machine Learning*. This method enabled the authors to interpret their results as measurements of the correlation between vocational training and the return to employment of unemployed individuals, corrected for observable differences in other characteristics. The authors thus conclude that vocational training is correlated with a reduced probability of returning to work in one's original occupation, and a greater probability of returning to employment in an occupation demanding very different skills from those associated with that original occupation.

Above and beyond the light it casts on the role of vocational training in getting unemployed people back to work in new occupations, we feel that this article illustrates the

potential of new machine learning techniques to revolutionise the econometric dimensions of public policy evaluation.

Taken together, these two articles illustrate the diversity of approaches which public policy evaluation can take, and, indeed, the diversity of the policies we seek to evaluate. Public policy evaluation remains a remarkably fecund field of research, and we look forward to welcoming you to the next Annual Conference on Public Policy Evaluation, co-hosted by the French Economic Association (AFSE) and the Directorate General of the Treasury. □