

Research Master's Thesis Prize 2017
Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences
Leiden University

Jury Report

The Faculty Board of Social and Behavioural Sciences has requested the Institutes of Education and Child Studies, Political Science and Psychology to nominate their top-rated research master's thesis for the 2017 Faculty Research Master's Thesis Prize.

The jury consisted of Violet Benneker (PhD candidate Political Science), Willem Heiser (chairman, professor of Statistical Consulting), Bryant Jongkees (PhD candidate Psychology), Katharina Pittner (PhD candidate Education and Child Studies) en Warner Tjon Sie Fat (lecturer in Cultural Anthropology). In order to ensure a thorough and uniform assessment, the Faculty Board had provided the jury with an extensive list of evaluation criteria concerning crucial aspects such as research design, theoretical and methodological strength, relevance and readability. Needless to say, due to the high quality of the three nominations, the jury faced a very difficult task in choosing just one thesis for the prize.

The members of the jury read and evaluated the nominated theses thoroughly. The jury was pleased to note that the three nominations were of high scientific quality and social relevance, while at the same time they set out from a variety of methodological perspectives. After a constructive and animated discussion of the arguments underlying the numerical ratings for the 20 assessment items, the jury unanimously decided to award the Research Master's Thesis Prize 2017 to the thesis nominated by the Institute of Political Science.

The award-winning thesis was supervised by Dr. Olaf van Vliet, and entitled:

**Social Investment in European Welfare States:
Towards More Jobs and Higher Labour Market Participation**

by Vincent Bakker

Following a broad and in-depth analysis of social investment policies, several at first sight unrelated political and social issues —like basic income and paternity leave— are brilliantly connected through a secondary statistical analysis of data collected by the *The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) over the period 1990-2009 for seventeen European countries. In this way, the study successfully identifies which social investment policies do have a substantial effect on employment and labour market participation, and which policies fail in this respect.

It is an amazing thesis on an important topic. Without doubt, the study can (and should) be published in a highly-ranked international scientific journal. The research goal and question are very relevant and well laid out. Furthermore, the labour market effects of social investment policies are a topical and important issue, both from an academic and a public policy point of view. In the past few years, a number of influential political economists (Anton Hemerijck, Brian Burgoon, Frank

Vandenbroucke, Kees van Kersbergen) have published important studies on social investment. In addition, the European Commission and a number of think tanks have contributed to a lively policy debate on social investment. Yet, we do not have a systematic assessment of the impact of these policies on labour market outcomes. Bakker's innovative thesis contributes to these conceptual, theoretical and normative debates by providing a thorough empirical analysis.

Based on an extensive review of the existing body of research — which shows a masterful command of the literature— the thesis highlights an interesting gap in the literature. The theoretical chapter provides a comprehensive framework that addresses important questions that add to our knowledge. Concepts are carefully defined, mechanisms are well described and explained, and the hypotheses are clear and grounded in the literature. The empirical analyses are based on panel data models which are state-of-the-art in the field of comparative political economy. The chapter on data and methods provides a very detailed description of the data, indicators, and method, based on a large number of relevant references. Bakker has implemented a number of innovations regarding the measurement of government expenditures on social policies. The execution of the empirical analysis is impressive. It combines extensive analysis, careful interpretation of the results, and solid robustness analyses.

The final chapter provides a nuanced discussion of the main findings. Interestingly, the results of the analysis suggest that some of the key arguments in the seminal literature on social investment are not in line with the data. Here, Bakker truly paves the way for future research. Furthermore, the writing is excellent. The grammar and spelling are very good, the style is clear and elegant and the presentation and lay-out are extremely professional. Every single sentence is well thought-out. Finally, according to the Institute of Political Science, Bakker has worked highly independently.

Leiden, 18 December 2017
Professor Willem Heiser,
Jury Chair of FSW Master thesis prizes 2017.