



An Education Perspective

Professor Anna Vignoles, Trustee

Thank you very much. I think I should probably start by saying that being a Nuffield Foundation Trustee is possibly the best job in the world because you get to read a huge range of research applications and fund them, and the exciting research that we fund is just really, really wonderful, so thank you all for submitting your grant proposals.

The research we fund is formed by our mission to be practical, to make a difference in people's lives, and that is of course particularly important in education. Education, both research and, indeed, education placements, have been at the heart of the Nuffield Foundation for a very long time. We have three aims: we want to understand the education process, we want to improve policy, and we also want to make a difference to practice. I should add that this does not mean that we don't fund blue-skies work, theoretical work, but it does mean that the research ultimately has to have the aim of making a difference to the education system.

Nuffield has had a long history of funding research that challenges in the field of education, and I think Nuffield-funded research challenges in three ways. It challenges the discipline itself, so it approaches research questions from a different perspective. For example, Nuffield is a funder that was funding quantitative research in education when most other funders were not. Nuffield-funded research challenges policy-makers. In the field of education it is absolutely critical that we have research funded by independent organisations because of the importance of getting perspective in the system. Nuffield-funded research also, I think, challenges the education system itself. We are funding projects that are considering alternative ways of running the education system, and that is a really important thing that we want to continue to do.

I've been asked to give a very brief steer on some of the issues that we think are very important, and particularly, our desire to fund work on child development, the development of children from the most disadvantaged families, and also work that improves teaching quality. You might wonder why our emphasis is on child development and teaching quality in particular. Well, in my view, if the Foundation's focus is on social and economic inclusion, then naturally, we are going to want to do more research on teaching and teacher quality, and that is because we know that poorer students benefit disproportionately from good-quality teaching. And we also know they are less likely to receive good-quality teaching, and we don't know enough about that area yet, so we're looking to fund more research on this topic.

The other area that we would like to fund more research on is the bits of the education system that are experienced by the most disadvantaged students. There is an awful lot of

research on pathways to higher education, and while that is very important – I research it myself – it is also the case that 50% of the young people going through our system at the moment are going to end up in further education, and it is a sector about which there has been very, very little research, especially in recent years. And I think it is also worth saying that when we look at the picture of education as a whole, there are big gaps in our knowledge. Our system-level analyses have got much better, because we have got good data; that's true. But as I have just said, large parts of the system are seriously under-researched, particularly anything to do with vocational education, alternative routes through the system, adult education, etc.

We have a growing body of research on interventions, and interventions that might make improvements to children's outcomes. We would obviously want to mention the important role of the [Education Endowment Foundation](#) in that, too. But actually, there is still a lot of scope for research that's going to make a practical difference to what teachers are actually doing in the classroom, and not all of that research can be done using large-scale randomised trials. We are seeking innovative and exciting ways that we can actually go about researching classrooms, so that when people turn around and ask an educationalist: "What would you do in the classroom? What should you advise teachers? What's the best way to teach?", that we actually have some answers.

We also still have a tendency to have opinions on education, rather than evidence, and they dominate education debates, and that means that Nuffield is about finding ways to engage practitioners in the research, so that we can move past that.

I would like to end by highlighting some basic questions that I think we do not have answers to. This is not necessarily a menu of things we want to fund, but I would suggest you have a think about it. What constitutes good teaching, and in what contexts? We need to move away from the idea that there is one model of good teaching, so can we find better ways of researching that? How can we identify, incentivise, replicate and support good teaching in our classrooms? These are the core questions we need to be asking. And specifically, as opposed to generally, how are we supposed to best spend the scarce resources that we have in the system? If I am a head teacher facing resource limits at the moment, what should I cut, what should I do less of? It is absolutely crucial that we understand that. And then, perhaps the one that keeps me awake at night is, why is it that teachers and teaching is not held in higher esteem? Why can we not reduce the attrition rate from the teaching profession? And what can research do to help us address that really very critical, important question?

So in summary, we want to focus our funding in a way that builds our knowledge of education in a cumulative manner, and above all, make a practical difference to the system, and I would encourage you to submit your grant proposals.