

## 2016 Klaus J. Jacobs Research Prize Recipient Prof. Orazio P. Attanasio

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Orazio Attanasio (Italian and British, born 1959) is the Jeremy Bentham Professor of Economics and currently Head of the Department of Economics at University College London (UCL). Moreover, he is Research Director at the Institute for Fiscal Studies, where he is also one of the Principal Investigators for the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Center for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy and where he founded the Center for the Evaluation of Development Policies. His main research interest lies in modeling household behavior in developed and developing countries.

### **Scientific breakthroughs and policy applications:**

Attanasio has pushed research frontiers by using economic models in combination with field experiments to assess and shape health and education policies in early childhood development in low-income and middle-income settings. His approach uses models of individual behavior to explain and generalize the evidence derived from randomized controlled trials on interventions above and beyond a specific context to other contexts and outcomes. This is a unique way to think about the generalizability and scalability of any program or policy in child development.

An important project where this approach was used was the design, implementation, and evaluation of a scalable early years intervention in Colombia – a large Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) of a stimulation and nutrition intervention delivered through home visits (including the largest evaluation of a program of this kind). Attanasio and his collaborators estimated a model of human capital accumulation that attempted to explain the results of that intervention. The study showed that intervention impacts were not obtained by improving parental “efficiency”, but by inducing parents to “invest” more in their children, spending more time with them, and buying more toys and books. Attanasio found that “investments in time” were important for socio-economic skills, while “investments in materials” (toys and books) were important for cognitive development.

The results of the Colombian experiment had much impact at various levels. The government of Peru used the intervention as a model for a parenting intervention deployed at scale, reaching hundreds of thousands of children. Attanasio’s research group is currently working with the Colombian government on the evaluation of a new intervention using an existing program and complementing home visits with group visits.

### **Future plans and aspirations:**

With the prize money Attanasio will expand a set of early years (6 to 36 months) interventions currently being implemented and evaluated in rural India to provide children with better quality childcare from 36 to 60 months. The curriculum for the early interventions was adapted from the Colombian project and is being delivered by the largest education NGO in India. The trial includes about 2,000 infants randomized to different treatment arms: three groups receiving some sort of early intervention and one control group receiving no treatment.

With the new project, the same groups will then be randomized to two groups one of which will receive a late intervention aimed at improving the quality of the childcare centers where the children go after “graduating” from the early interventions. As a consequence, in addition to a pure control group, there will be children receiving both late and early interventions, children receiving the early but not the late intervention and children receiving the late but not the early intervention.

The data will allow exploring the role of different dimensions of child development (health, cognition, socio-emotional skills) in this process and how and at what age they are (most) affected by

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interventions. This type of study will be the first to provide evidence on the interactions of potentially very effective and scalable interventions at two key stages of the child development process. As such, Attanasio expects the study to have important implications for the design of effective complementary policies over the different stages of early childhood.

### **Honors:**

Fellow of the Econometric Society, Fellow of the British Academy, President of the European Economic Association (2014); American Economic Review Excellence in Refereeing Award (2014); Royal Economic Society Award for the best paper published in the Economic Journal in 1988-1989 (1990); University of London's Sayers prize for the best thesis in Monetary Economics and Economic History (1988); "Cassa di Risparmio di Calabria e Lucania" scholarship (1984 and 1985).