Evidence-based policy and higher education quality assurance

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Abstract

Over the last three decades, higher education policies have undergone significant changes not only in Europe but also globally. These changes are closely linked to the economic, social environment factors and influenced by neoliberal reform agenda, that includes deregulation, privatization, competition, globalization, managerialisation policies. The article seeks to clarify theoretical as well as practical aspects of evidence-based policy (EBP) and overview recent EBP studies related with higher education quality assurance. Literature analysis method was used by analysing evidence-based concept; different forms of evidence employment in policy-making; document analysis was used by analysing the European higher education area vision by 2030. Main findings: there is no uniform interpretation of the evidence-based policy concept; three sources of knowledge, relevant for evidence-based policy making, are well accepted: scientific; professional and political; instrumentality and legitimacy are main drivers that promote the choice of policy instruments. The current research concludes that the main national level quality assurance policy instruments (accreditations, audits) and European higher education policy instruments (European qualification framework (EQF), European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Europe (ESG)) are used in mix, highly varies country to country and have tendency of rapid change; policy instruments' focus on both quality assurance process and outcome; abundance of policy instruments accelerating policy accumulation effect and increase the risk of not being implemented as planned, having negative impact on each other. The article sheds light on

policy instrument attribution scientific problem, identified in policy impact studies and suggests that there is a need for further studies related to policy instrument coherence better understanding as well as studies that broaden view and clarifies policy instrument dependence on the complex of factors.

Key words

evidence-based policy, higher education, quality assurance

Introduction

Evidence is perceived as capable to improve functioning of government, including legislature and public service, that makes assumptions for superior outcomes for individuals as well as for society. As evidence is not used for instrumental (direct use of research to solve the problem) purposes in policy making as much as for political rhetoric, it might suggest that evidence-based policy is controversial, but indeed, political use of evidence, "like instrumental and conceptual (indirect use of knowledge) use, is a legitimate and fundamental component of policy-making" [Newman, 2017, pp. 215-220].

Evidence-based approach could be employed by selecting and implementing policy instruments. Thus, purpose of evidence-based policy is to facilitate the selection of information, that would help design public policies that are able to meet their objectives by answering to the questions such as, "how to improve policy by improving the mechanisms through which policy is created and implemented or dedicated units within government" [Newman, 2017, pp. 215-221].

Evidence-based policy in higher education quality assurance has attracting attention, facing new rounds of evaluation, demanding the evidence of positive quality assurance effects on higher education, particularly on student learning as the primary target of quality policies. While there is no evidence about the impact quality assurance has on student learning, it is important to examine how quality assurance system can use evidence-based approach and what kind of evidence is needed, besides it would be rational as well to have a broader look to the evidence contribution to policy process and quality improvement issues [Beerkens, 2018, pp. 272-273].

Indeed, quality assurance systems evolve in dynamic, complex context, where transnational forces influence setting of objectives and their priorities. These priorities as well as different stakeholders' expectations constantly changing over time and rise tensions that needs to be addressed. In the same context factors influence higher education policy design, thus the incoherence between policy instruments potentially can emerge as in general, policy instruments evolve on path dependence

logic, and rarely are innovatively redesigned [Capano, 2017; Feeney & Hogan, 2017].

There is evidence that policy instrument such as performance-based funding produces many unintended impacts such as reduced admission of less advantaged students, narrowing institutional missions, rising inequality among higher education institutions (HEIs), growing stratification of academic labor force [Dougherty & Natow, 2020, pp. 467-471], decline of HEIs' autonomy [Jongbloed *et al.*, 2018, p. 685], while at the same time, social equity and HEIs' autonomy were prioritized at the European higher education area (EHEA) 2020 Rome Ministerial Conference, where Ministers responsible for higher education reaffirmed that social inclusion in higher education is the cornerstone of the EHEA and adopted "Principles and Guidelines for Strengthening the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA" based on a broader understanding of the social dimension. Ten key principles serve as conceptualization of different policies for social dimension enhancement [Bologna Process, 2020, p. 4-8] by emphasize on: social dimension centrality in higher education strategies in all levels (system, institutional, EHEA, EU) as well as higher education institutions responsibility towards widening access to, participation in and completion of studies; inclusiveness of the entire education system; evidence-based improvement of social dimension in higher education; effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students; sufficient, sustainable funding and financial autonomy to HEIs; HEIs capacity to respond to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body and create inclusive learning environments as well as institutional cultures; international mobility programs; community engagement; public authorities engagement in a policy dialogue with HEIs and other stakeholders.

The signs, that European higher education area (EHEA) makes a turn towards strengthening social dimension in higher education, autonomy of higher education institutions seems promising in the challenging context of higher education. Social dimension has strong links, as note Crosier D. and Haj C.M. [2020], with digitalization, sustainable development paradigms that should guide policy-making toward uptake of the digital technology, new way of thinking and cooperation by overcoming emerging global challenges. Widening access and participation can be regarded as a strategy change since the social benefits of inclusion in higher education can have long term effects on the individual and the society, such as tolerance and expanded networks, contribution to the economy, cohesiveness in society, political participation, etc [Torotcoi *et al.*, 2020, p. 177].

According Kupriyanova V. *et al.* [2020, pp. 437-439] autonomy, that includes organisational, financial, staffing, academic autonomy, is a pre-condition for the capacity of higher education institutions to be efficient an effective. However, there is

evidence that there are governments in Europe, that maintain control by mixing various policy instruments and "balancing institutional autonomy with a type of tools restricting or strongly driving the behaviour of universities" [Capano & Pritoni, 2020, p. 1008].

The aim of the current research is to present the concept of evidence-based policy and reveal the ways, how evidence-based approach can be used in higher education quality assurance.

The study addresses following question: what evidence-based policy is, and how evidence could be used in higher education quality assurance and broader - higher education policy?

Research methods. To the raised questions, following research methods were used:

1. Literature analysis was used to reveal the concepts of evidence-based policy, evidence informed policy-making, data-based policy making concepts; to analyse quality assurance as a regulatory instrument development path; to analyse European higher education context.
2. Document analysis was used to analyse the European higher education area vision by 2030, to reveal the main expectations on Higher education institutions.
3. Overview of previous conducted mixed studies was used to analyse practical aspects of higher education policy instruments' potential incoherence.

1. Evidence based policy

Politicians and policymakers have a responsibility to make value decisions and develop practices using evidence, that should relate the purpose and values of education [Biesta, 2009], by treating education as a social good within democratic societies [Helgetun & Menter, 2020, p. 15]. Evidence-based policy (EBP), as observed Newman J. [2013], is an approach that can advance policy strategies to meet chosen policy objectives, but in a democracy those objectives will be determined by local contexts and complex political dynamics [Dobrow *et al.*, 2004, p. 212; Meier and O'Toole, 2007, p. 794; Stolcis, 2004, p. 367; Dvorak, 2015, p. 131-132]. Thus, the democratic legitimacy is of great importance if we acknowledge that policy is by its nature based on social appropriateness not pure consequentiality, therefore main concern is not, how 'pre-translate' evidence to ensure it 'lands', but rather provide as accurate an estimate of what the current state of the evidence may or may not inform [Helgetun & Menter, 2020, pp. 15-16]. There is an interdependence between

cultural-cognitions, norms, and policies and "changes in one dimension should reverberate across the other two", meaning that policy is depended, on one hand, on norms and cultural-cognitions, and on another hand, is capable to make influence on them [Helgetun & Menter, 2020]. According to Helgetun J. B., when evidence move from research environment to different policymaking environment thus may cause the contradiction. Coherent logic should extend from the start of evidence production to application (evidence informed policy continuing with the same logic), if not the full research process from inception to application cannot be considered robust, regardless of the validity of each individual step [Helgetun & Menter, 2020, p.16].

Evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM) definition according to Iftimescu S. *et al.* [2020], have emerged in literature responding to growing interest in studying the role that evidence plays. EIPM is defined by different authors with some approach variations, from "help people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence at the heart of policy development and implementation" [Davies 1999, p.124], to Cooper *et al.* [2009] understanding, associated with "knowledge mobilization" [Iftimescu *et al.,* 2020, p. 325].

Iftimescu S. *et al.* [2020] observed that the term EIPM in literature is named as unclear term, questioning variety of "evidence" sources: scientific evidence, statistics, expert knowledge, stakeholders' consultations, previous policy evaluations, other information sources and output from economic and statistical modelling. Thus, it is well accepted, that following Cain [2015], Wieser [2016], there are three sources of knowledge, relevant for evidence-based policy making: scientific knowledge; professional knowledge and political knowledge [Iftimescu *et al.*, 2020, p. 325].

In the "evidence-based" vs "evidence-informed" policy discourse, Head [2008] has clarified, that contribution of evidence, depends on the type of policy issue [Beerkens, 2018, p. 280], what indicates that both terms could be used depending on the purpose.

There are many factors that play direct role in the process of decision-making, as Iftimescu S. *et al.* [2020] summarise, political priorities, resource availability, contextual factors, different forms of evidence and agents, involved in different contexts and there are different explanatory models, that integrate different contexts by conceptualizing, how evidence and policy are linked. For instance, following Young *et al.* [2002], there are knowledge driven, problem solving, interactive, tactical, enlightenment models [Beerkens, 2018, p. 282]. Following Head [2013], evidence could be used, by those in position to influence public policy, in three ways: instrumental use (direct use of research to solve social policy problems), conceptual use

(knowledge is used to generate ideas that affect policy slowly and indirectly), political use (rationalization of predetermined policy choices or symbolic tactical gestures, as well as other political applications) and key distinction here lies in intent: the use of evidence can be intended to help address a defined problem (instrumental use), or used in some political strategy (political use), or there can be no immediate goal at all (conceptual use) [Newman, 2017, p. 213].

There is an important distinction, as notes Newman J. [2017], between policy implementation and policy advice generation activities: in first case, evidence would be used to choose instruments to implement a government's chosen policy direction wile in second case, evidence would be used to create policy options that would then be transmitted back to the executive level. Thus, evidence could be used in all policy circle stages, but as Beerkens [2021] notes, "instead of taking time to collect data, analyse, formulate a response, organisations are expected now to be agile and resilient and respond to the problems in real time". In such a case, "Big data" can serve decision-makers by providing more and better information.

„Big data" contribute to a change of public management paradigm, following Margetts and Dunleavy [2013], Digital Era Governance is the next generation within New Public Management, with model, that focusses on „reintegrating services, providing holistic services to citizens and implementing digital changes in administration" [Beerkens, 2021, p. 12]. Big data is one of important inputs for data-based policy making (DBPM) [Acar *et al.*, 2021, p. 105; Verstraete *et al.*, 2021, p. 73], and steering of the system and in the same, as notes Beerkens M. [2021], opens another perspective on performance control and accountability, shifting external control towards organizational continues quality improvement of services. According to Beerkens M. [2018], there is also another, evidence-based approach to teaching within HEIs, that is realised by monitoring students' learning and collecting evidence about the effectiveness in providing education for self-development and self-regulation reasons. Besides, growing digital solutions for learning analytics, student counselling and services provides opportunities to use "artificial intelligence" and shape learning environment focusing on more personalised, more responsive, more relevant higher education.

Evidence-based approaches to quality assurance can take different forms, the choice depend on purpose, as Beerkens M. [2018] notes, it is important to distinguish the purposes for collecting evidence, as "in evidence-based policy approach, information is collected to understand effectiveness of quality assurance policies and to use the knowledge for adjusting and changing the design of the policy instrument". This purpose is different than collecting evidence for accountability purposes. Quality agencies evaluate their activities regularly as well as the state of higher education

sector in general. Beerkens M. [2018] notes, the issue is not a lack of evidence, indeed, there are evidence on positive effects of external quality assurance systems on HEIs, for instance, strengthened the position of central administration, thus contributed to strategic management and change in attitudes, curriculum development, coherence of study programmes, reflective practice, etc., but there are no answer to the question about, what and under what conditions various quality assurance policies have impact on student learning, as the primary target of the quality policies. To proof, that quality instrument has increased student learning and develop optimal quality assurance mechanisms, encourage quality education, through (quasi-) experiment may be technically challenging and cost ineffective, but according to Beerkens M., there is still important role of evidence in enhancing higher education quality as "evidence contributes to policy making via policy networks and policy communities throughout the policy cycle, from agenda setting and policy formulation to decision-making and evaluation, effective evidence concerns not only impact but also problem definition". What is the problem, that needs to be addressed? What are alternative solutions, and would they work? All these are equally important questions that require an evidence base.

2. Quality assurance as a regulatory instrument

National quality assurance systems develop in complex political environment and are influenced by developments in Europe as well as globally. European higher education area (EHEA) in relation with Bologna process make significant formal and informal influence together with the main instruments as European qualification framework (EQF), Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), U-Multirank system, accreditation and formal body - European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). There is no direct regulation at global level [Elken, 2017, p. 137], rather method of "soft - law" coordination [Kohoutek *et al.*, 2018, p. 203] used to gain a global competition, for instance, global rankings, certifications, industry labels, etc.

Quality assurance in higher education as a regulatory instrument should be seen as one of regulation policy instruments. Next to quality assurance, simultaneously co-exist and interact other policy instruments, for instance, but without limitations, regulations of students' admission and taxation; academic career and recruitment; institutional and administrative governance; etc [Capano & Pritoni, 2020, pp. 994-995].

Quality assurance as a regulatory instrument in higher education originated according to Jarvis D.S.L. from the late 1960s with first set up of accreditation organizations. Two decades from the starting point quality related issues "were internalized within government and managed through traditional bureaucratic arrangements" together with accountability, transparency, efficiency requirements [Jarvis, 2014, p. 157].

Significant changes, related to quality assurance development occurred after 1990 and as Westeheijden *et al.* [2007] observed, evolved from single initiative to "well-institutionalised regulatory regime" [Beerkens, 2015, p. 231]. Quality assurance system in Europe „emerged out of synergy between changes in higher education landscape as well as paradigmatic changes in the dominant governance mode in the public sector" [Beerkens, 2015, p. 232]. As Jarvis D.S.L. [2014] identified, four dominant factors interacted in the context of quality assurance in higher education that time: spread of new public management (NPM); declining effectiveness of traditional bureaucratic governance systems due to rapid growth of sector (higher education massification); increased strategic importance of sector in economic development; expectations on HE for value creation in terms of global knowledge-based competition. According to Capano G., Pritoni A. [2020], the challenges that have emerged in higher education in period of 1990 and 2020 have led to: a rethink of governance models at both the institutional and systemic levels; redesign of governance arrangements. As Capano G. and Pritoni A. note, through changes in governance, governments pushed higher education institutions (HEIs) to become more effective, efficient, more responsive to societal needs. Different levers (quality assessment of research and teaching as well as institutional autonomy, funding mechanisms, institutional governance, role of the state) were formed differently over European countries, but in general - governments changed the state-control model to steering from a distance [Capano & Pritoni, 2020, p. 991].

To understand the purpose of quality assurance as regulatory instrument, quality should be operationalised fist. Quality has a strong normative meaning as well as political basis according to Beerkens M. In normative sense, according to Harvey and Green [1993] quality could be interpreted in five different ways, as: exception, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money, transformative [Beerkens, 2015, p. 234]. The definition of quality is important while developing quality assurance system, having in mind that stakeholders can have their own understanding about it and even quite different [Pechmann & Haase, 2021, p. 5]. This different understanding of stakeholders, according to Beerkens M., depends on what they see as a potential quality problem, which in response should be addressed by quality assurance system. Both, quality definition and quality problem formulation contribute to

a choice of quality assurance instruments. The combination of instruments responds to societal expectation to recognize excellence as well as fitness for purpose or value for money. There is abundant list of quality assurance instruments as note Dill and Beerkens [2010] in different instruments' coordination mechanism levels (market based, self-regulatory and hierarchical): accreditation procedures, audits, benchmarks, HEIs rankings, peer reviews, qualitative and quantitative indicators, surveys of students, graduates, employers, national graduation tests. Accreditation is dominant quality assurance instrument and is used in different variations over the Europe, starting institutional accreditation, continuing with study programme or study field and ending with mix. Furthermore, as notes Beerkens M. [2015], there is increasing emphasis on outputs, such as quality standards, learning competencies with different measure forms, for instance, students' final thesis, national graduate examinations, assessment of learning outcomes. Following Beerkens M., there are parts of Europe (Netherlands, Austria), where is a noticeable shift towards institutional audits, that focus on institutional processes and "touch the core of the institutional processes and support effectively the collaborative actions within the university to really change the teaching and learning process" [Beerkens, 2015, p. 239].

While discussing about the purpose of quality assurance, Beerkens M. notes, that conceptual rationale and political level should be distinguished. There are a wide range of quality assurance purposes according to Beerkens M.: to ensure quality enhancement, to have legitimacy, to ensure accountability (as well as transparency and comparability), to ensure compliance with requirements, to inform stakeholders, to stimulate HEIs competitiveness, student mobility, to change the governance of HEIs, to make international comparison, encourage internationalisation, etc. Quality assurance in political sense Beerkens M. directly links to politics as governments identify "quality" as priorities in higher education (for instance, economic development; equity; accountability; activities of interest groups), that without doubts vary over time [Beerkens, 2015, pp. 235-236]. To respond to such a variety of constantly changing different stakeholders' expectations, quality assurance instruments are used in different mixes, that it is obvious, are overlapping. Without any doubts, quality assurance systems expected to be effective as well as relevant. The question is, how do we know this is the case? Further in this article follows the topics, linking the changing context of EHEA and empirical research results with the vision of European higher education area (EHEA) by 2030.

3. European higher education area: vision by 2030

The European higher education area (EHEA) by 2030 vision, that was shared in EHEA 2020 Rome Ministerial conference, guide to inclusive, innovative and inter-connected area, where: higher education is a key actor making changes improving knowledge, skills and competences, meeting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); quality - hallmark of the EHEA; academic and scientific integrity is supported by higher education institutions an public authorities; values in the EHEA are shared through political dialogue and cooperation [Bologna Process, 2020, pp. 4-5].

Inclusive EHEA. There is a commitment to reinforce social inclusion of individuals enhancing education, using digitalization opportunities with respect to ethical standards and human rights. There is a call to implement Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA in national systems considering broadened understanding of social dimension. Ministers have asked Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) to report on steps taken and the related monitoring measures to assure evidence-based follow-up in 2024.

Innovative EHEA. There is a call to Higher education institutions to intensify search for solutions to the challenges that our societies face and up-date knowledge, skills, and competences; ensure flexible and open learning paths, student-centered learning; to offer smaller, flexible units, including those leading to micro credentials in the context of live long learning; invest in the development of digital skills and competences for all.

Interconnected EHEA interpreted as cooperation among diverse cultures and higher education systems through mobility, alliances formation; efficient, transparent exchange of data to foster synergies and contribute to excellence and relevance of higher Education.

In parallel academic freedom definition has been revised, emphasising the aspect of academic staff and student freedom to engage in research, teaching, learning and communication in and with society.

Ministers' commitment for further development of National Qualification Frameworks compatible with Qualification framework of European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) were set. Network of QF correspondents mandated to continue development of QF-EHEA and self-certification of national qualifications frameworks against it.

Responding to challenging higher education context factors, Ministers' in EHEA 2020 Rome ministerial conference committed for further development of quality as-

surance systems by removing of remaining obstacles, related to cross-border operation of EQAR-registered agencies (EQAR-The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education); assuring external quality assurance that covers transnational higher education; enhancement-oriented approach to The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) in the light an increased need for flexibility, openness of learning paths, smaller units of learning and greater synergies among higher education institutions [Bologna Process, 2020, pp. 4-5].

For the achievement of defined targets in EHEA, enactment of higher education policies will be inevitable as well as implementation of measures in national frameworks, which will require a broader review of national (economic, financial, social) strategies [Bologna Process, 2020, p. 4]. In the same ministers responsible for higher education ask Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) to develop a framework for: firs, the enhancement of EHEA fundamental values – institutional autonomy, academic freedom and integrity, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education; second, making it possible to assess the degree to which these are honoured and implemented in the systems.

4. Neoliberal European Higher education area?

Higher education governance and funding faces unprecedented challenges of COVID-19 pandemic, refugee crisis in Europe and as if that wasn't enough, Zanoni P. *et al.* [2017] names the decline in economic growth rate and rise in overall indebtedness and economic inequality, prevalence of populism, electoral mutinies, that evolve in unforeseen unimaginable ways. To understand the scope of challenges that have emerge in European Higher education, broader view to EHEA context is required, thus it is important to describe higher education external and internal context factors (tab. 1).

Higher education is expected to take leading role by developing solutions for addressing the challenges that arise from listed external and internal factors. The Process as well as mechanism that enable to identify challenges for the adjustment of higher education environment through appropriate policies to face these challenges are needed [Curaj *et al.*, 2018, p. 10].

Tab. 1. European Higher education context

Components of the environment	Context factors
External higher education context	
Technological	Technology and digitalization as a necessity for society
Social	Growing inequalities; shrinking middle class, growing class of precariat; traditional welfare state crisis; population ageing; a growing demographic decline; increasing youth unemployment; changes in the lifestyle; refugee and illegal immigrants' crisis: rapidly increasing numbers and a hardening of attitudes in many European countries
Political	The rising of populist ideologies, challenging of established status-quos and democracies; increase in violent extremism; decrease of a broad consensus on basic political and societal principles; the emergence of "alternative facts" and "post truth politics"
Economic	Slow recovery from the economic recession and financial crisis (2008–2012); emerging protectionism, tensions between old and newly emerging industries; sharply divergent views on globalisation
Culture	Following the previous post-materialistic cultural developments, a sort of cultural backlash is at work, bringing to the fore formerly dominating cultural values
Regional/ Global	European Union is searching for its new future, while growing tensions within the wider Europe and in the shaping of globalisation waves are constantly emerging, including Brexit challenges; COVID-19 pandemic
Internal context of higher education	
Learners	Decrease of student numbers, influenced by the decrease in demography
Providers	Wider range of providers, challenging traditional providers with respect to programmes and credentials
Fundamental values	Refocus on academic values and principles as the political context in some countries has put negative pressure on the autonomy of higher education institutions
Funding	Growing imbalance between the public and private financing of higher education; agreement-based funding
Inclusiveness	Growing expectations on higher education to address academic and non-academic new societal challenges as these without limitation: engagement to societies addressing threads (and those caused by the pandemic) to global peace, democratic values, health and wellbeing; integration of refugees; contribution to the achievement of the SDGs; commitment to transparency)
Innovative learning and teaching	The need for up-dating of knowledge, skills and competences in order to respond growing need for innovative, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, leadership, problem solving abilities, enterprising attitudes; the need of smaller, flexible units of learning, including those leading to micro-credentials; development of digital skills and competencies for all; re-emphasis on vocational, professional higher education
Interconnectedness	The need of further development of international and intercultural competences of learners; the need of efficient, transparent exchange of data for enhancement of recognition, quality assurance and mobility

Components of the environment	Context factors
Bologna process	Harmonisation of degrees and quality assurance approaches within EHEA; decrease of attractiveness of the Bologna process, especially at the political level; variable levels of the Bologna process implementation in the overall EHEA, which have led to an increased need for dealing with non-implementation

Source: [Curaj, 2018, pp. 3-4; Bologna Process, 2020, pp. 5-6; Salmi, 2018, p. 141; Zanoni, 2017, p. 575].

Among the main issues that should be addressed immediately by the policymakers are: the gap between school system and higher education; interaction between higher education and society; leadership in combating populism, extremism, anti-intellectualism; collaborative approach to internationalisation through curriculum and learning outcomes; autonomy and academic freedom; growing pressure to address academic as well as non-academic new society challenges; the need for higher education public policies for new data and the capacity to integrate big data in the new policy and governance systems; capacities for digital environments; financing and governance of higher education with regard to listed objectives and values [Curaj *et al.*, 2018, p. 10-11].

There is a need for higher education institutions to acquire more institutional freedom which is expected to support more efficient work of higher education institutions by implementing the European and national policy goals. There are governments that promoted reforms about higher education institutions autonomy, but at the same time, there are cases of restrictions on autonomy and academic freedom in different parts of Europe [Curaj *et al.*, 2018, p. 9]. For example, researchers evaluated the mix of higher education policy instruments in 16 European countries (Austria, England, Czech Republic, Finland, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway) and found that over the last 25 years, the number of constrains has increased from 50 to 70 per cent [Capano & Pritoni, 2020, p. 1005]. On the one hand, higher education institutions are granted autonomy, while, on the other hand, alongside the policies that grant this autonomy, other public policy instruments are used (regulation, evaluation, and information type), which constrain or even have the appearance of taking over the field of action. This constant "balancing act" can be explained by the fluctuating effects of "steering from a distance" (giving HEIs autonomy but managing them through different types of evaluation, i.e. institutional evaluation and accreditation, study programme evaluation and accreditation, annual evaluation of scientific production, etc.), or "re-regulation" (imposing legislation or restrictions that have previously been removed) as a result of previous diachronic reforms, but these trends do not reveal the causes of the phenomenon, and a deeper

case study is needed [Capano & Pritoni, 2020, p. 1007]. In the following circumstances, the neoliberal interpretation is substantially misleading: "governments have continued to govern their higher education systems and increased the constrains over time". Governments maintain control by mixing various policy instruments and "balancing institutional autonomy with a type of tools restricting or strongly driving the behaviour of universities" [Capano & Pritoni, 2020, p. 1008].

Autonomy of higher education institutions is not the only issue that calls for rethinking, equally important are the values and ideology that guide governance of higher education. Indeed, public administration theories, that include neoliberal ideas, such as: new public management (NPM), principal-agent theory, performance management, public-choice theory, transaction-cost theory, deeply shaped higher education policymaking [Dougherty & Natow, 2020, pp. 458; Evans, 2018, p. 23; Jarvis, 2014, p. 155; Capano & Pritoni, 2020, p. 991]. Almost three decades HEIs in many European countries as well as worldwide "fitted themselves out with what are generally considered the trappings of neoliberalism – new public management, performativity, competitiveness, consumerism, and the commodification of services and personnel" [Evans, 2018, p. 23]. This phenomenon is not only being spread from macro to meso level as observes Evans L., but in the same is a reason of dissatisfaction, that manifests itself as a requirement for changes in how organisations are run – by what principles and ideologies they are guided. Evans L., state that the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reflects the whole of nations' sectors and systems and seen for the most part as neoliberal higher education area.

Neoliberal theory contributes to understanding how higher education sector can be effective and efficient but still neoliberal "market fundamentalism" is an object of widespread critique in social theory, social policy, and social practice [Dougherty & Natow, 2020, p. 471]. Implementing the principles and guidelines for strengthening the social dimension in higher education outlined in Rome Ministerial Communique [Bologna Process, 2020], it is a must to deconstruct higher education policy instruments in the light of perspectives from sociology, political science, anthropology, social and organizational psychology, that according to Dougherty K.J. and Natow R.S. [2020] provide a deeper analysis of policy design and implementation than the economic formulations on which relies neoliberal theory. For instance, with regard to neoliberal policy making outcomes, the performance-based funding (PBF) appears to produce improvements in student-support practices, research administration, HEIs research productivity, but there is little evidence that it produces better student retention and graduation rates (in the meta-analysis of 12 US studies, Bell *et al.* (2018) found that the average impact on degree completion is not distinguishable from zero; studies of PBF in Europe also fail to find any significant impact of PBF

on student completion in the case of Denmark) [Dougherty & Natow, 2020, pp. 467-471]. In the same, performance-based funding, according to Dougherty K.J. and Natow R.S., produces many unintended impacts that neoliberal theory largely ignores, such as reduced admission of less advantaged students (in order to improve performance), narrowing institutional missions (studies of PBF in US, Europe, Canada, Australia), rising inequality among HEIs (studies in US and Europe found that it has led to research funding being more concentrated on top universities, making it harder for other institutions to compete), growing stratification of academic labour force. According to Jongbloed B. *et al.* [2018], HEIs and student organisations in the Netherlands, linked performance-based funding to decline of the HEIs' autonomy, due to setting national targets and uniform indicators; additional bureaucracy; financial penalty; core indicators which in some cases contributed to unintended effects, etc.

Thus, policy instruments are fundamental component of public policies and in certain mix generates intended outcomes as well as unintended effects. It can be difficult to achieve the target to strengthen social dimension in higher education while other higher education policy instruments generate unintended negative effects, as it was illustrated in presented research results, related to HEIs restricted autonomy, reduced admission of less advantaged students. The Rapidly changing higher education context and changes in expectations towards higher education, implies that deconstruction of higher education policy instruments (or fallowing Saguin K.I. [2019], finding it at incomplete policy mix, one that failed to introduce critical procedural instruments) is inevitable in order to fix the tensions and eliminate higher education policy instruments incoherence. Quality assurance bodies also could be more explicit in how their instruments are developed; are these instruments relevant with quality and changing perceptions about it [Beerkens, 2018, p. 283]. As Harvey and Newton observed [2007], "worldwide, the preponderant approach to external quality evaluation is pragmatic, often working backwards from the political presumption, driven by new public management ideology, that higher education needs to be checked if it is to be accountable. In some cases, the method is determined before the purpose" [Jarvis, 2014, p. 164]. Data is needed not only for internal and external accountability, product and service improvement, but also to examine the impact of quality assurance instruments for learning, as many quality assurance instruments focus on performance indicators or process reviews, and even more – reliable evidence is needed to evaluate effectiveness and efficiency of existing regulations, by identifying incoherent, fragmentated higher education policy instrument mix, that in fact reflects policy instrument choice reality. Our challenge, then, is to make sure, that "when EHEA reaches the age of 30, it will be an area of coherent higher education policy and practice" [Bergan & Matei, 2020, p. 371].

To understand policy instrument choice, policy making process needs to be reconstructed through the lens of logic of sense making (consensus building) and effectiveness (outcomes achieving), as following Mahoney and Thelen [2010] "legitimacy and instrumentality shape the circumstances under which the change happens" [Capano & Lippi, 2017, p. 286].

Policy instruments are often result of "mediation within policy design process, whenever decision makers reshape existing instruments without introducing any real innovation" [Capano & Lippi, 2017, p. 269]. Many factors influence decision makers' choice of policy instruments, following Capano, G. and Lippi, A. [2017], including ideas, individuals, institutions, interests, an international environment. All of them are perceived as directing the choices, thus, the choice of instrument depends on the range of factors, and it is not the automatic result of any one factor, for instance, economic performance, stakeholders' interests. Decision makers' choices are typically driven by combination of factors "grounded in the political, economic and institutional context" [Capano & Lippi, 2017, p. 269]. Following Capano, G. and Lippi, A. [2017], it is important to underline, that „according to both, historical and socio-organizational institutionalisms, policy instruments when considered as institutions can be bearers either of lock-in effects [Pierson, 2000] or of a set of social and political values, and as such, they can contribute towards the construction of reality [Le Gales & Lascoumes, 2007]". These "institutional features as well as context factors could be considered as "elements of contingent configurations that limit the choices of decision makers", but these configurations cannot be understood as predeterminations, there is still a space for agency [Capano & Lippi, 2017, p. 273]. Thus, following Capano, G., Lippi, A., while selecting policy instruments, decision makers are framed within specific setting, and it is important to identify drivers that "framing the selection of policy tools by systematically channelling individual attitudes and environmental constrains.

Following Capano, G., Lippi, A. [2017], from empirical point of view, policy-making process need to be reconstructed to gain better understanding of policy dynamics. For instance, whether, why decision makers do certain decisions in policy formulation phase; what are effects of new adopted policy instruments, so as "to identify any possible feedback effect on decision makers and on the actual interpretation by the implementers of the newly designed set of instruments", as it is critically important in understanding of "how the internal incoherence of the actual set of adopted instruments can be used by implementers to reinvent the actual instrument package itself" [Capano & Lippi, 2017, p. 288].

From theoretical point of view, "there is the gap between the literature on governance modes and that on policy instruments, and problem of policy and institutional change" [Capano & Lippi, 2017, p. 288]. Policy instrument choice is based on "recurrent patterns of selection, leading to different policy mixes", according to Capano G., there is a shortage of knowledge, that could explain, how this reality can be related to the coherence between governance models and the corresponding policy tools. And in the same, as notes Capano G. "adopted tools is the result of different forms of layering, that is, of the different political relevance of the potential choice of instruments to be pursued", thus problematize the operationalization of layering and theories of gradual institutional and policy change.

Conclusions

In our study we argue that evidence-based approach can contribute to policy instruments' design, considering complex context factors, by improving policy creation and implementation mechanisms, in order to achieve policy objectives.

The contribution of concepts, such as evidence-based policy, evidence-informed policy, data-based policy making, depends on the type of policy issue and are used depending on the purpose.

Evidence could be used by policy makers in three ways: instrumental use, conceptual use, political use, depending on the purpose, that can vary from a problem solving, to political strategy development. The main drivers that promote the choice of policy instruments are instrumentality and legitimacy. Many factors influence decision makers' choice of policy instruments: ideas, individuals, institutions, interests, global forces.

Analysing the contemporary trajectories of the IT was found, that big data is one of important inputs for data-based policy making and steering of the system and in the same, opens another perspective of state supervision, shifting external state control towards organizational responsibility for continues quality improvement and accountability.

All in all, evidence-based approaches to quality assurance can take different forms, the choice depend on purpose. It is important to distinguish the purposes for collecting evidence. In one case the purpose is to understand effectiveness of quality assurance policies, in second - to collect evidence for accountability purposes, and finally, the purpose could be to collect evidence within HEIs about the effectiveness in providing quality education for self-development and self-regulation reasons.

Both, quality definition and quality problem formulation contribute to a choice of quality assurance instruments. The combination of quality assurance instruments

responds to societal expectation towards higher education quality, that can differ from recognition of excellence, as well as fitness for purpose, or value for money. Still there are no answer to the question about, what and under what conditions various quality assurance policies have impact on student learning, as the primary target of the quality policies. To proof, that quality instrument has increased student learning, encourage quality education is technically challenging through (quasi-) experiment, but there is still important role of evidence in enhancing higher education quality as evidence contributes to policy making from agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. It is important to emphasise, that not only impact evidence is needed, but also reliable evidence is essential for problem formulation.

However, main national level quality assurance policy instruments (accreditations, audits) and European higher education policy instruments (European qualification framework, (EQF) European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Europe (ESG)) are used in mix, highly varies country to country and have tendency of rapid change. Policy instruments' focus on both quality assurance process (audits) and outcomes (accreditation).

Policy instruments are fundamental component of public policies and in certain mix generates intended outcomes as well as unintended effects. The rapidly changing higher education context and changes in expectations towards higher education, implies that deconstruction of higher education policy instruments is inevitable in order to fix the tensions and eliminate higher education policy instruments (their mix) incoherence.

Additionally, there is a need for further studies, related to policy instrument coherence better understanding as well as studies that broaden view and clarifies higher education policy instrument dependence on internal and external context factors.

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Polityka oparta na dowodach a zapewnianie jakości w szkolnictwie wyższym

Streszczenie

W ciągu ostatnich trzech dekad polityka w zakresie szkolnictwa wyższego uległa znaczącym zmianom nie tylko w Europie, ale także na całym świecie. Zmiany te są ściśle związane z ekonomicznymi i społecznymi czynnikami środowiskowymi, a także wynikają z wpływu neoliberalnego programu reform, który obejmuje deregulację, prywatyzację, konkurencję, globalizację i politykę menedżerską. Artykuł ma na celu wyjaśnienie teoretycznych i praktycznych aspektów polityki opartej na dowodach (Evidence-based policy – EBP) oraz przegląd najnowszych badań nad EBP związanych z zapewnieniem jakości w szkolnictwie wyższym. Zastosowano metodę analizy literatury, analizując koncepcję polityki opartej na dowodach; różne formy wykorzystania dowodów w tworzeniu polityki; zastosowano analizę dokumentów, analizując wizję Europy jako obszaru szkolnictwa wyższego do roku 2030. Główne wnioski: nie ma jednolitej interpretacji koncepcji polityki opartej na dowodach; trzy źródła wiedzy, istotne dla tworzenia polityki opartej na dowodach, są dobrze akceptowane: naukowe; zawodowe i polityczne; instrumentalizm i legitymizacja są głównymi czynnikami promującymi wybór instrumentów polityki. Z bieżących badań wynika, że główne instrumenty polityki zapewniania jakości na poziomie krajowym (akredytacje, audyty) oraz europejskie instrumenty polityki w zakresie szkolnictwa wyższego (Europejskie Ramy Kwalifikacji (European qualification framework – EQF), Europejskie Standardy i Wytyczne dla Zapewniania Jakości Kształcenia w Europie (European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Europe – ESG)) są stosowane łącznie, w dużym stopniu różnią się między krajami i mają

tendencję do szybkich zmian; instrumenty polityki koncentrują się zarówno na procesie zapewniania jakości, jak i na wynikach; brak instrumentów polityki przyspiesza efekt kumulacji polityki i zwiększa ryzyko, że nie zostaną one wdrożone zgodnie z planem, wywierając negatywny wpływ na siebie nawzajem. Artykuł rzuca światło na naukowy problem atrybucji instrumentów polityki, zidentyfikowany w badaniach wpływu polityki i sugeruje, że istnieje potrzeba dalszych badań związanych z lepszym zrozumieniem spójności instrumentów polityki, jak również badań, które poszerzają spojrzenie i wyjaśniają zależność instrumentów polityki od zestawu czynników.

Słowa kluczowe

polityka oparta na dowodach, szkolnictwo wyższe, zapewnianie jakości