

The Role of Impact Evaluation in Evidence-Based HE Policy Making: The Contribution of Transparency Tools

Lucian Ciolan, Mihai Păunescu, Ciprian Fartușnic, Romiță Iucu
and Călin Hintea

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1 The Need for Informed Higher Education Policies

The articulation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and related policy processes has brought into attention a series of challenging “transition” paradoxes, mainly to the strategic steering of higher education systems and institutions, but also to the key actors in this field. High among them are the following:

- From the elite to the massification of education and training;
- From the local/regional approach to the global approach;
- From the use of mainly governmental funds to attracting private investments;
- From collegial management/steering to corporate management/steering;
- From national to cross-national standards;

L. Ciolan (✉) · R. Iucu
University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania
e-mail: lucian.ciolan@gmail.com

R. Iucu
e-mail: romiuc@yahoo.com; iucu@unibuc.eu

M. Păunescu
National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bucharest,
Romania
e-mail: paunescu.mihai@gmail.com

C. Fartușnic
Institute of Educational Sciences, Bucharest, Romania
e-mail: cipf@ise.ro

C. Hintea
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca, Romania
e-mail: hintea@fspac.ro

- From regional to international mobility;
- From national cultural frameworks to cultural diversification;
- From accreditation to quality enhancement mechanisms—trust, transparency, impact;

Starting from the last point above, namely the need for trust, transparency and impact assessment, we will try to illustrate the role and function of transparency tools (with a specific case-study) in the new conceptual picture and social mission of higher education in Romania.

In the following chapter we will undertake an ex-ante analysis of the implementation of one tool (U-Multirank) in Romania, as an example of a relevant policy that aims to address the information asymmetry at the level of the higher education sector. The U-Map sets to develop a more elaborated and versatile model through which institutional performance can be measured and compared, and also a series of new indicators, considered as being more appropriate and valid to capture the perspectives of beneficiaries by the authors of this approach. Our analysis is therefore a contribution to the current debate regarding the tools for impact assessments at system level, suppliers, professional practice and student and other direct/indirect beneficiaries level and their role in assuring a higher transparency and information symmetry (Hazelkorn 2012; Usher and Jarvey 2010; Van Vught and Ziegele 2011). The aim of the chapter is to identify the policy measures that best address a set of external criteria that refer to the scope, the impact, the depth and the associated costs of the intervention. We will approach this ex-ante impact analysis by estimating the advantages and disadvantages of each of the policy options identified, based on the secondary analysis of the existing data. In the end we will propose a policy measure that best addresses the transparency issues given the criteria that we set.

Higher education represents a set of institutions through which high-level qualifications are provided following professional and academic training processes (Witte 2006; Maasen and Stensaker 2011). This set includes educational suppliers (higher education institutions), stakeholders (students, academic staff, parents, employers etc.), regulatory and supervisory organisations (the ministry, consultative committees, quality assurance agencies etc.), regulations, social rules and practices. Higher education is organised similarly to a market, in a broad sense of the word, a market in which educational services suppliers offer study programs at various levels (bachelor, masters, doctorate) to current students and potential beneficiaries. The market runs mostly on the principle of demand and supply. The state is an important social stakeholder which plays a key role in the transactions between various actors (suppliers, clients, beneficiaries) in order to correct the dysfunctions caused by market imperfections. Government interventions are made through educational policies in the higher education sector (Curaj et al. 2012; Păunescu et al. 2011). The need for these policies is justified by the following core reasons:

- (1) Higher education is a public (or partially public) good or it exhibits the features of such a good. The benefits of higher education are non-exclusive, since they spill over to the society at large and do not only affect the direct

beneficiaries (graduates, their families). The development of the human capital is crucial for an economy, allowing its organizations to recruit highly qualified workforce. Therefore it plays an essential role in attracting capital investments and economically developing the society as a whole. In addition, the innovation and the technological progress facilitated by the universities are beneficial to the society in general. The development of citizenship through the higher education study programs also has a positive impact on the democratic functioning of a nation. As it does produce a lot of positive externalities (the benefits go beyond those who pay the direct costs for its provision), it displays the features of a public good, higher education tends to be produced and delivered at suboptimal levels, entailing that generally higher levels of provisions and consumption would pay the additional costs. This leads to state intervention through public policies in order to increase participation or consumption (measured, for example, through transition rates from secondary to tertiary education, higher education enrollment rate; the percentage of degree holders in the 30–34 years age group, etc.) or to enhance the quality of the results and the scope of impact (graduation rates, labor market insertion rates). Public policies in higher education generally pursue such objectives, aiming at raising the overall participation in the sector, as well as the effectiveness of the educational sector (Vlăsceanu et al. 2011).

- (2) Secondly, at the level of the higher education sector, there is an information asymmetry between providers and beneficiaries of educational services, which leads to systemic distortions of the market. Student choices are distorted because of the lack of standardized and comparable information on the higher education providers. Students most often rely on surrogate information such as peers' choices or family guidance. This situation is actually to the advantage of education providers. The lack of state or other type of regulations indirectly encourages higher education suppliers to publish only the favorable pieces of information that drives their competitive advantage or to process and analyse the data to their own advantage. A certain degree of approximation can be found in all these types of information, since it does not always reflect the quality of a study programme/supplier. Consequently, decisions are made without relevant information and inefficient social services do not easily find their way out of the market (Hazelkorn, 2011; Păunescu et al. 2012).

State intervention through public policies enforces a certain standardization of the information provided by the higher education suppliers in order to make it usable and comparable. Transparency tools such as the multi-dimensional higher education institutions classification (U-Map) or the multi-dimensional ranking (U-Multirank) are examples of recent policies assisting future students by enabling evidence-based individual decisions. Seen from a public policy perspective, the use of these tools contributes also to three important dimensions/functions (Ciolan et al. 2009):

- The accountability function, responsible for determining the quality of the public policy and for accountability to beneficiaries and financiers, which have to be informed in regard to any intervention performance and impact;