

Evidence-based policy in higher education quality assurance:

Learning from the experience of others

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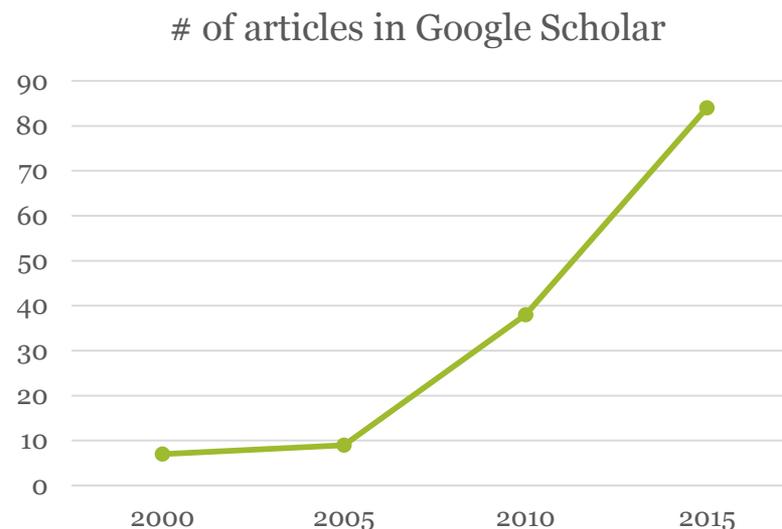
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‘Impact’ in higher education QA

- A prominent theme in QA networks and agencies:
 - ENQA working group on impact
 - ESG: “continuous improvement within the agency”
 - INQAAHE: effects of the QA and how do we know it
- Academic papers on the ‘impact of quality assurance’
 - from 7 in 2000
 - to 84 in 2015



Development towards ‘impact’

Reasons behind increased interests:

- ‘Enthusiasm’ replaced by ‘realism’ in QA (Stensaker)
- Professionalisation of the field
 - QA as a technical expertise instead of a political instrument
- Evidence-based policy movement
 - extending from medicine and social work (‘interventions’!)

Key challenges for impact studies:

- Measuring effects (measuring what matters, counterfactuals)
- Not constant effects (changing over time and in context)
- Multi-dimensionality (on learning, but also political legitimacy and accountability)

What do we know about the ‘impact’ ?

- Ex-post impact evaluation “in infancy” but

insights on effects:

- the position of the teaching task
- more collegial discussion about teaching/curriculum (coherence)
- reflective practice
- alienation of teachers
- professionalization (specified procedures, paper trail)
- administrative burden
- power shifts: more power to administration, to students
- ...

The use of evidence in QA

- Evidence about the effects of a QA instrument ('impact' studies)
- Evidence-based approach as the object for QA
 - e.g. CACREP, TEAC in the US: Does the program collect and respond on relevant data on learning and graduates? (ESG as well)
- Evidence as input for QA procedures
 - What is being evaluated and does it make a (proven) difference for learning?
 - e.g. effects of contact hours, benchmarking practice
- Evidence-driven QA instruments
 - e.g. National Survey of Student Engagement, explicitly based on research on what matters for student learning (e.g. Pascarella and Terenzini): time spent on studies, use of high impact practices (research based learning, interaction with staff, etc.)

Challenges in ‘evidence-based policy’

- Impact evaluation and the nature of the issue
 - ‘easy issues’: discrete, bounded, linked to particular information and actors -> technocratic
 - ‘difficult issues’: complex, inter-linked, cross-cutting -> relational and negotiated decision making
- Why expectations often fail?
 - Goals are ambiguous, means uncertain
 - Decision less about expected consequences, but more about process and legitimation
 - Policy making rarely a rational process from information to solution

How is evidence and policy linked?

- Knowledge driven model:

 - research leads policy

- The problem solving model:

 - policy issues shape research policy

- Interactive model:

 - research and policy influences mutually, shaping within 'policy community'

- The political/tactical model:

 - policy outcome of a political process, studies commissioned on political purposes,

- Enlightenment model:

 - research at a distance, to help to set the context for policy makers, providing a frame of thinking.

(Young et al. 2002)

Multiple evidence bases

Authoritarian vs democratic 'truth'?

- cost-benefit approach
- impact measurement: objective, quantifiable
- multiple evidence bases

Multiple evidence bases:

- Scientific (research) evidence
 - gold standard: experimental, quantitative
 - complex environment: hermeneutic, 'action-research',
policy/program assessment part of iterative social learning
 - Practical knowledge
 - practical wisdom of professionals in their communities of practice
 - Political knowledge
 - communication, ideological spin, menu of possible alternatives, key actors
- => policy communities, policy networks

Head (2008)

Beyond straight-forward EBP

- Research findings (ex-post evaluation) only one kind of evidence to show what works
 - ... even then, how/why something works is the key knowledge
- Insights from various research needed
 - experience in different applications may give insights how and when it works
 - theoretical insights e.g. from organizational and behavioral theory
 - knowledge from similar attempts abroad
 - need for a good synthesis of evidence
- ‘What works’ is not the only policy relevant question
 - What is the problem, what is going on, what might be done about it?
 - Therefore also good descriptive, analytical, diagnostic, theoretical and prescriptive research needed, not only evaluative.

A political dimension in EbP

- Evidence and power

Interest of academics: demonstrate the usefulness of (social) science

Interest of practitioners:

- to demonstrate the efficacy of particular practices, perhaps as a result of the loss of public confidence in many professions in recent years.

- pragmatism replaces ideology (efficiency and effectiveness in the NPM)

- QA is difficult to push into a ‘technocratic’ corner

- but evidence on ‘impact’ is a valuable *input* for a societal discussion

- shift towards network approach

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