

Will the future of Higher Education be evidence-based? A different perspective

FRANS KAIZER, Centre for Higher Education Policy & Studies, CHEPS, NE



International Seminar on “Evidence-based research: methodological approaches and practical outcomes. Insights for Online Education”

OPEN SESSION - Will the future of Higher Education be evidence-based? - Barcelona, 22 November 2017

I take a different perspective. I have a different background. I do not have a background in educational sciences. I have a background in public administration. I work in a centre for higher education policy studies. Not policies and studies. We do not make policies; we look at them. And that is quite a different perspective here. So the question that was asked as the theme of this round table could be slightly modified by inserting the word “policy” in it. So will higher education policy in the future be evidence-based?

Well it is a nice question. I think that people would agree more on that and a positive answer there than maybe on learning analytics. I am not quite sure. However, if we look at what policy actually is, there are many definitions there, but I would rephrase the question: will decisions on goals, on targets and instrumentation and how to reach these targets, and on evaluation of the results, will that be based on relevant empirical information? That could be a rephrasing of that question. And I think the most important words in that, and I think that has been touched by some of the previous speakers is relevant information. What is relevant information? And that depends on a number of things, and they have all mentioned already before.

First, what are the goals? What are we trying to achieve with our policy? And whose goals? Is it the goal of the national policy maker, you have all kinds of levels. You have national policy makers, you have institutional policy makers, administrators, but also the goals if even you are another level further down at the classroom, at the individual, or even at the student. What goals are they trying to achieve? How can that achievement be measured or assessed? I mean, measuring is always a quantitative thing. Through assessment and maybe also in qualitative ways. But that is another question there.

And what policy instruments were designed, actually? And implemented. And to what extent can this achievement or this changing achievement be attributed to these instruments? And that is mentioned here as well, the complexity. And how can we think that the use of one instrument brought about a change in behaviour, as we know that there are so many other factors that might have an impact? So, basically what we need and what I think is of the utmost importance is contextualization. All this information has to be put in the proper context. Otherwise, it is not information, it is just data. So I think, and that is the only point I want to make, I think we need to have a conceptual framework in which we state our ideas, our assumptions, on how these instruments will lead to achievements and how other events, instruments, and conditions may be

related or linked to that achievement and to each other. What we need to have is in policy and our education policy makers use indicators as these quantifications. How are these indicators linked to each other? And what context has an impact on the links between the indicators?

I think that only if we have a clear conceptual framework that only in that case we can claim that policies can be evidence based. New technologies, scraping the web for information, all these smart algorithms, I mean, it is a wealth of information and it can be a blessing for social science as well. But I think only if we know the questions that we want an answer for it. Without having an idea of what we are trying to know and what we are trying to answer only with that question, a proper question in our mind, then we can use these data. Otherwise, it is just information overload. And the negative thing is that policymakers will use it only for cherry picking and only for using it for their purposes and to support their convenient truth.