

Closing the Circle: Research and Policymaking in Education

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Mechanisms for knowledge mobilisation and research brokering in
education*

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Context



Literature review



Literature review (1) – On research

Levin (2013)

- The process of knowledge mobilization in policymaking **implies a variety of factors, agents and contexts**
- The educational research domain is considered **'too small, not well organized, and the results are not effectively communicated or shared'**

Ion & Castro (2016)

- The context of knowledge production is **dominated by the role of universities and research institutions** in generating knowledge based on evidences

Cummings et al. (2007)

Kwiek (2015) Honerød (2012)

- The knowledge production literature generally focuses on **research funding, on research management and on the strategies** used by academics in order to enhance the research transfer and utilization



Literature review (2) – On policymaking

Conrad (2005) Whitty (2006), Bell et.al. (2010) Levin (2011), Ion & Iucu (2015)

- Research outcomes must **be comprehensible** for policymakers, stakeholders and practitioners or other type of audience.

Popa (2012)

- The highly **bureaucratic system** might play a significant role in the way of knowledge transfer and mobilization.

Locke (2009)

- Policymakers' perception of research described as **irrelevant, lacking quality, untimely and poorly presented**.

Coburn & Talbert, (2006); Hess, (2008); Levin & Edelstein (2010); Cherney, Povey, Head, Boreham, & Ferguson (2012)

- Research is considered to have **little impact in society** and often **fails to meet the decision-makers' needs**.



Literature review (3) – Research, teaching and learning & policymaking

Levin et al (2011)

- Research findings represent a **critical factor in any innovative change process in education.**

Cordingley (2013), Mincu (2014)

Sebba et al., (2012), Godfrey (2014, 2016)

- Using research in decision-making is **associated with better teaching and learning**, schools and systems.

Gough (2004), Lavis (2006), Cain (2016)

- Studies exploring the complex context of policymakers are still underdeveloped in the educational field.

Davies (1999), Cooper, Levin & Campbell (2009),
Gough et al. (2011), Nutley et al. (2009), Weiser
(2016), Cain (2016), Ion & Iucu (2014)

- **Evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM)** - describes the growing interest in studying the role that evidence plays in the policymaking process.
- There is little agreement about what the term EIPM really indicates, but the way it is configured depends on the articulation of different factors **linked to individuals, groups and organizations.**

General context

Most often, there is a **focus on challenges**, rather than on opportunities or areas of improvement.

The overall image depicted in the literature points at several challenges faced by transfer and mobilization of educational research to policy, **mostly from the researchers' perspective.**

Our research intends to fill this gap and advance the debate on the topic of knowledge mobilization **adding the perceptions of policymakers.**



The Romanian context

Research production in the educational field in Romania is influencing the research utilization in policymaking, and its **quality, funding and relevance** are key elements to consider (Ion and Iucu, 2014).

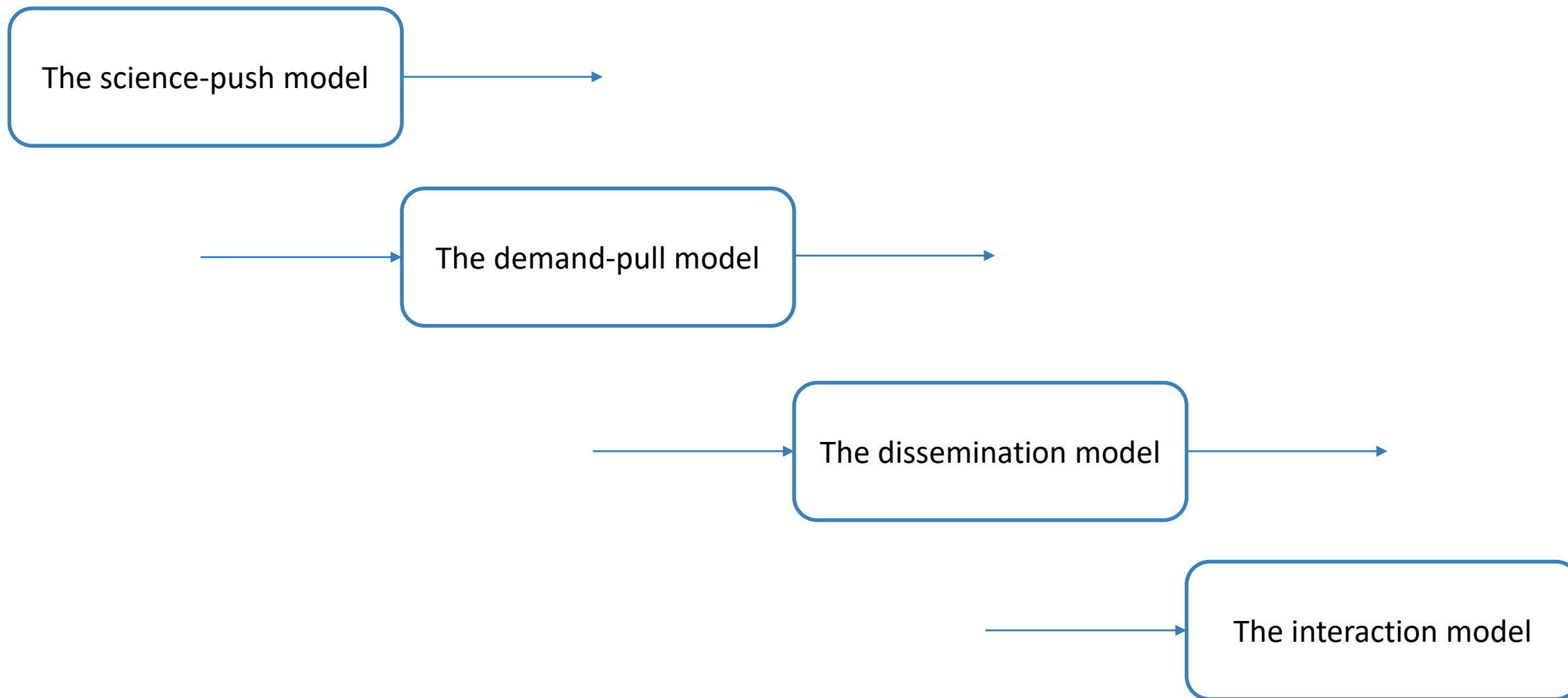
The Romanian case indicates that there is a particularly important relationship **between financing and research production**.

Data show that investment in these areas still comes **below the EU average** (Curaj, 2015), with only 0.17% of GDP allocated to research and innovation in 2019 (similar to 2018, but lowest in 10 years).

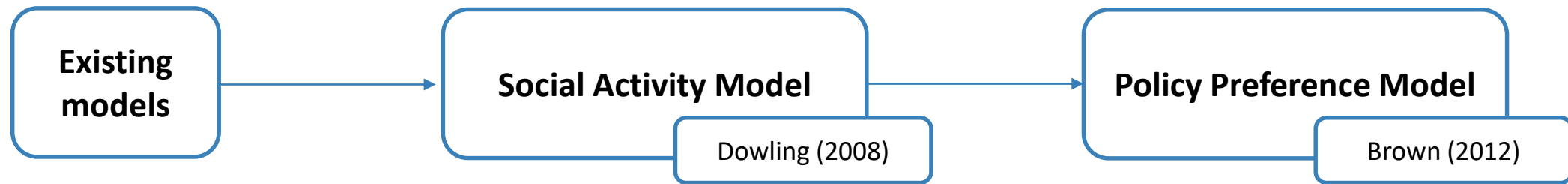
Fragmented and under-funded institutional settings (with frequent changes in the structure of the advisory councils of the Ministry of Education and other national bodies, or unreliable funding) (Curaj, 2015)

The quality of applied research is affected by an interference with the design stage and micro-production, especially when compared to other EU countries, where applied research is not **government-funded**, as is usually the case in Romania.

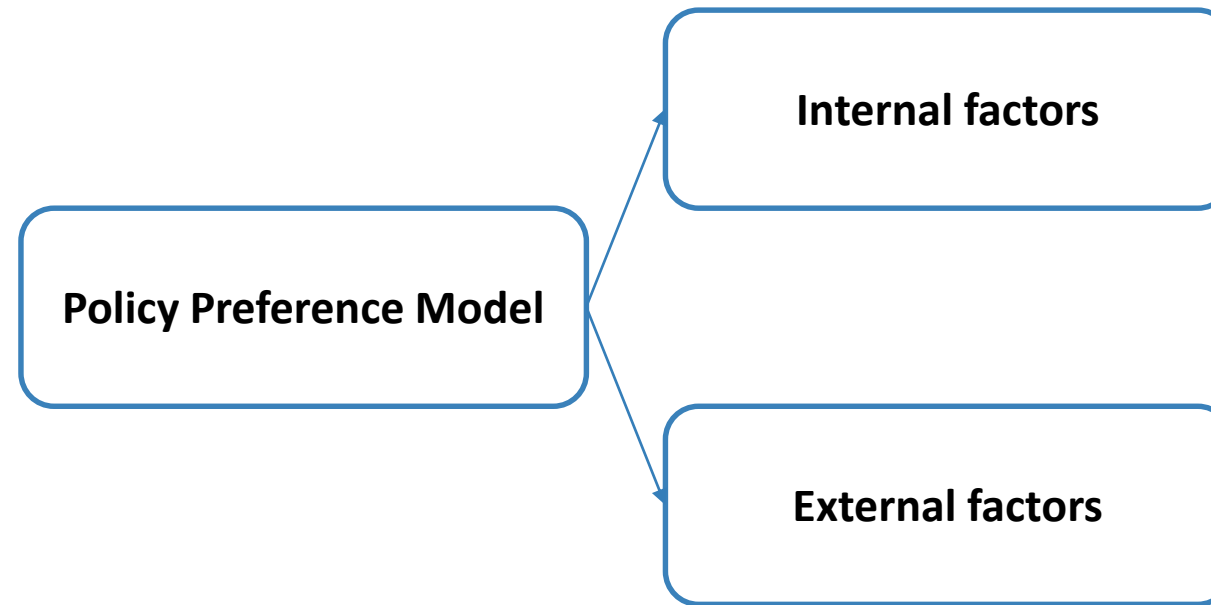
Theoretical models



Theoretical models



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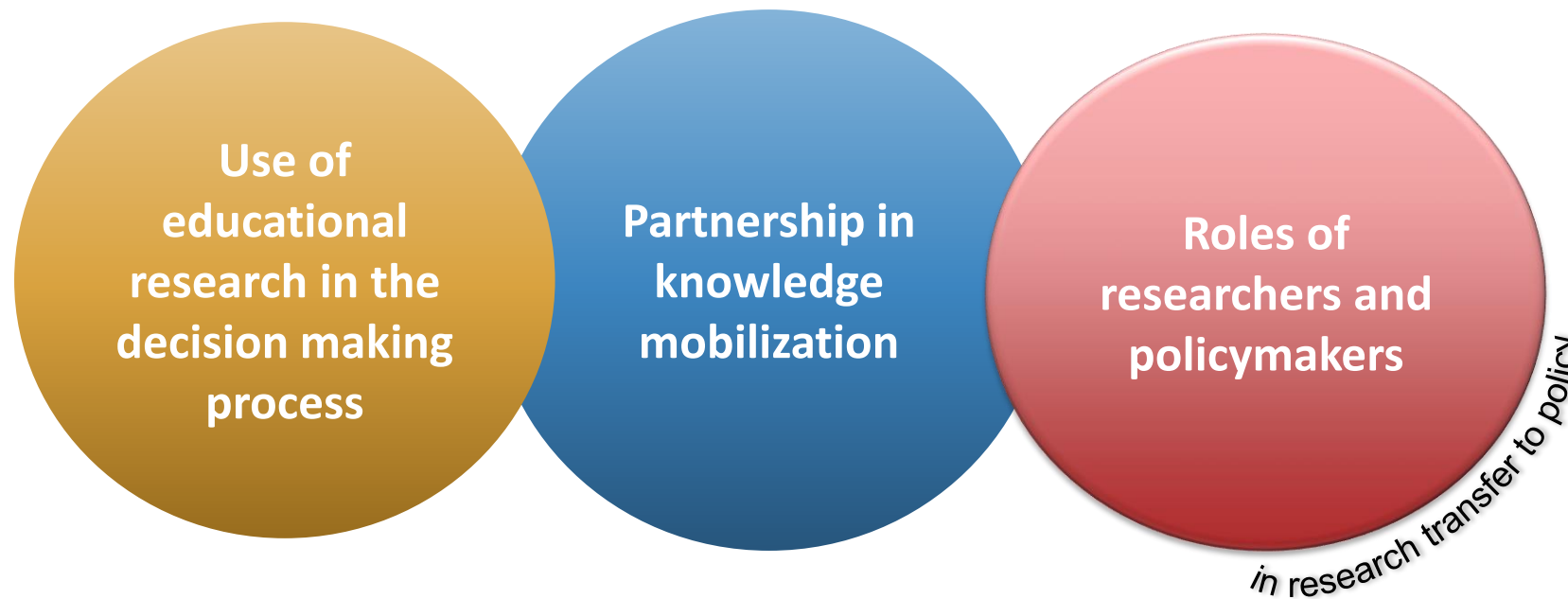


Research methodology

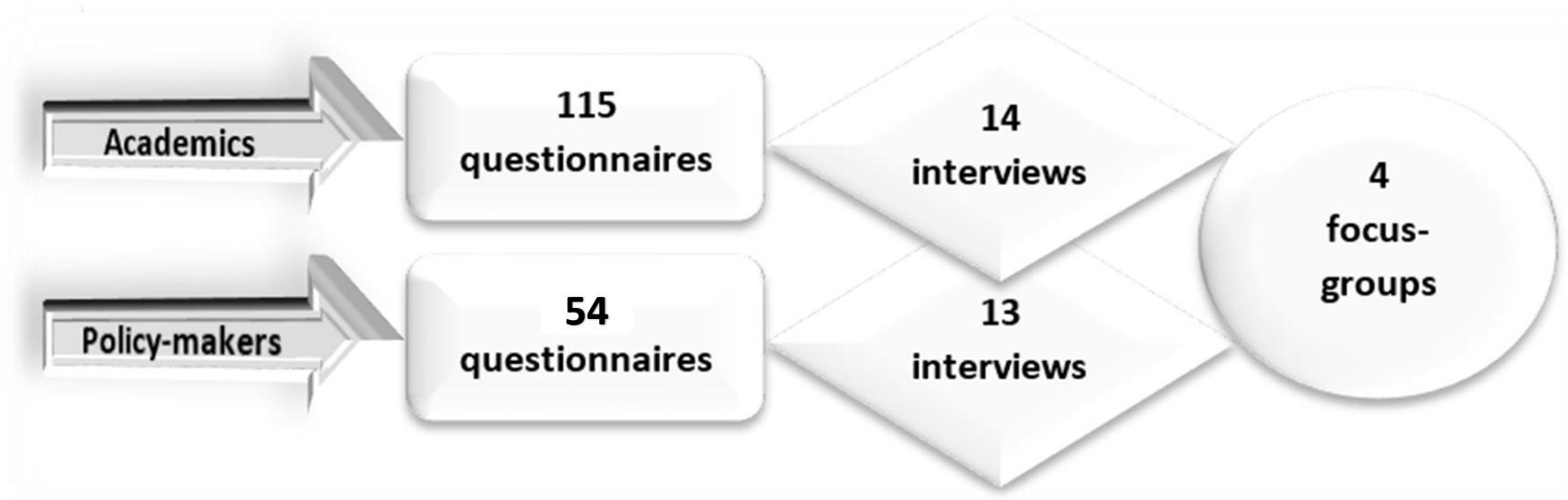


Overall research objectives

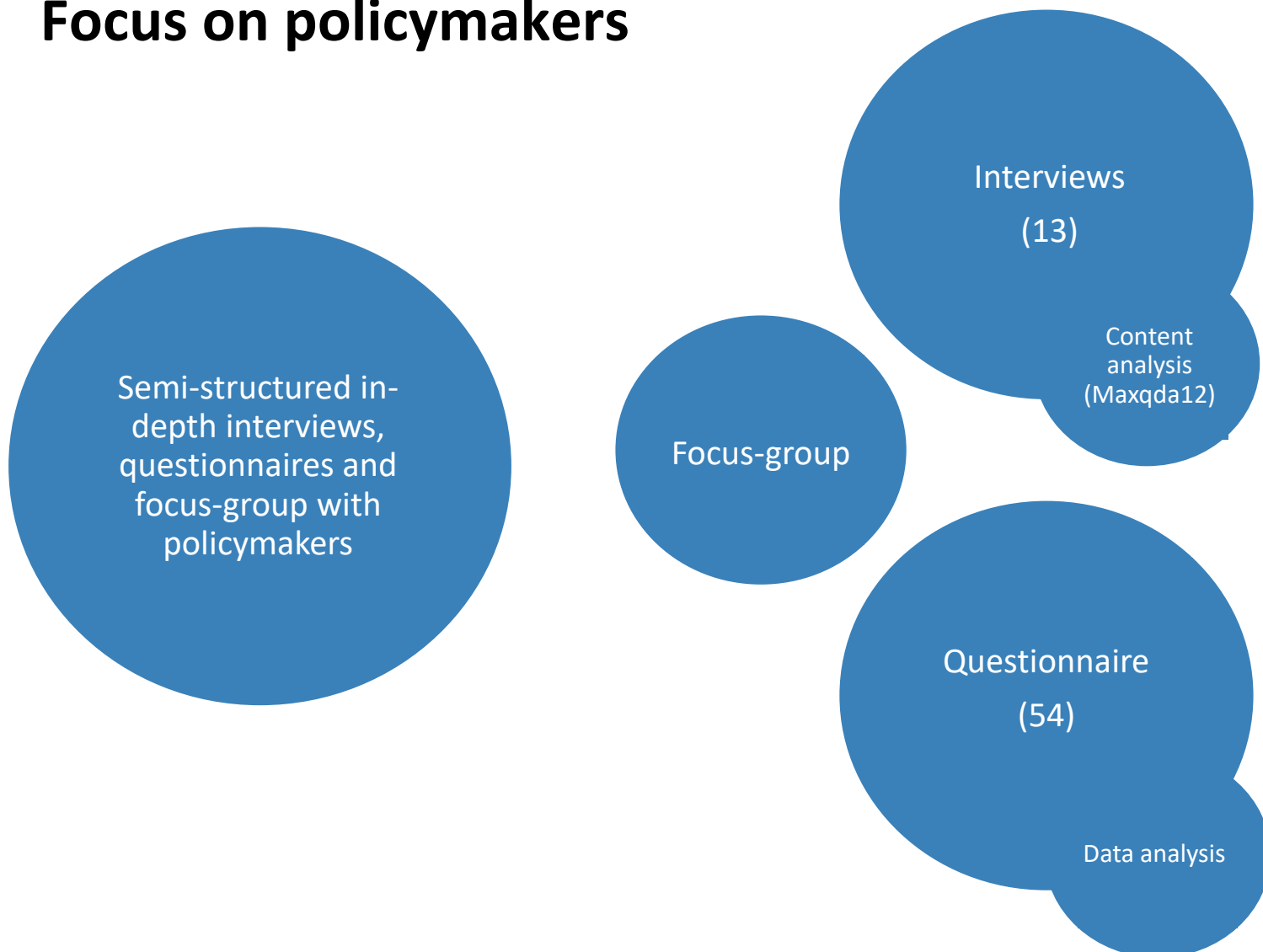
Identify and analyze the perception of policymakers on the:



Research instruments



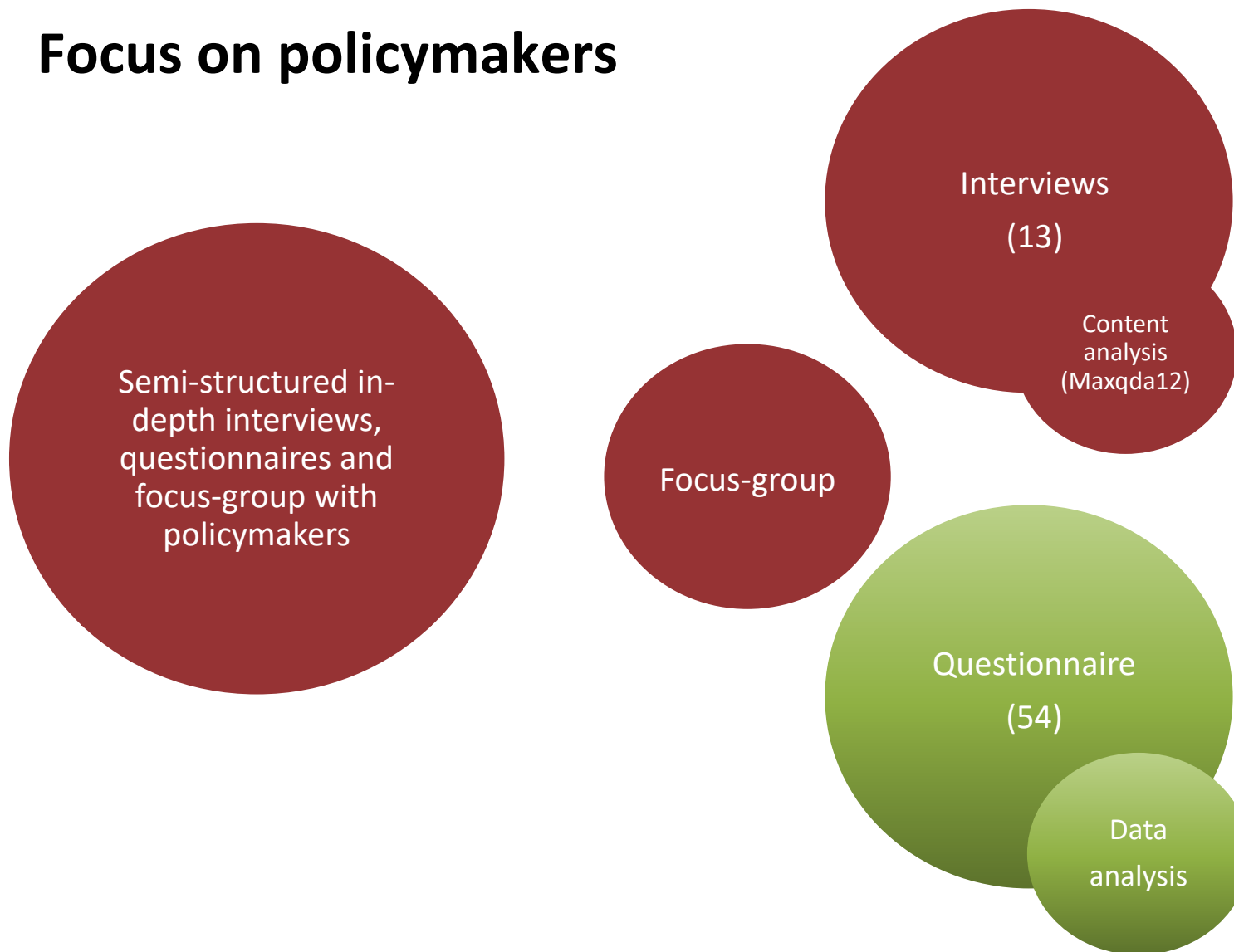
Focus on policymakers



1. the process of research production and mobilization;
2. the importance given to research results;
3. the factors that may influence the research production and transfer;
4. building a partnership that will support the process of research mobilization;
5. priorities in the field of research mobilization.

1. Internal factors
2. External factors

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1. Internal factors
2. External factors

Sample

Institution	%
Ministry of Education	67%
Strategy and Public Policy Unit within the Ministry	4%
National Agency for Community Programs for Education and Professional Development	7%
Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education	4%
Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education	4%
The Executive Unit for the Financing of Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation	2%
Other public institutions (in the field of education)	12%

Number of valid targeted email addresses*	Number of responses	Response rate**
425	54	12.7%

* Employees of national institutions responsible with education and decision-makers with a role in educational bodies at a national and local levels.

** Low response rate seen in context could have potential implications for topic of research and results' analysis.

Innovation in learning and teaching, strengthening EHEA-ERA cooperation

No. of years	Experience in the current position	Overall professional experience
1-5 years	38.6%	0.0%
6-10 years	9.1%	2.3%
Over 10 years	52.3%	97.7%

Role	Response percentage
Administrative	10%
Expert in a certain field	40%
Executive	26%
Documentation/Research	8%
Planning	20%
Evaluation	12%

Education level	Response percentage
Bachelor's degree	8.16%
Master's degree	51.02%
PhD	38.78%
n/a	2.04%

Results



1. Internal factors influencing the uptake of research by policymakers

Focus on the policymakers' perceptions on the:

- nature and clarity of communication;
- access and availability of data;
- factors linked to their preferences for research topics;
- different sources of information.



1. Internal factors influencing the uptake of research by policymakers

Statement Role within the institution	Results with direct implications on policies and practices are a priority	The results being readily available when a decision has to be made is a priority	Research results written in a clear language for decision-makers are a priority	Research which contributes to the existing theoretical knowledge are a priority	Impartial results of the research are a priority
Administrative	5	4.8	4.8	4	4.2
Expert in a certain field	4.65	4.5	4.58	4.2	4.7
Executive	4.85	4.69	4.54	4.54	4.46
Documentation/ Research	5	4.75	4.75	4.5	3.5
Planning	4.4	4.5	4.4	4.3	4
Evaluation	4.83	4.5	4.33	4.17	3.67
Rating average	4.78	4.62	4.56	4.28	4.08

Table 1. *When you want to use results of academic educational research, which aspects do you consider a priority? (On a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 represents 'low priority' and 6 represents 'high priority')*

Priorities for policymakers when using research results:

- **the practical and applied side of research** to the detriment of fundamental research, which contributes to the existing theoretical knowledge;
- **the availability of results** when a decision has to be made, an aspect that encourages more communication and synchronicity between research and decision-making agendas in order to ensure research is relevant to current issues and readily available for decision-makers;
- **clarity** with regards to the presentation of research results.

1. Internal factors influencing the uptake of research by policymakers

Statement Role within the institution	Technology has greatly improved access to scientific evidence	Academic research is independent from the political agenda	I often use research evidence when I formulate/ initiate/ evaluate an educational policy initiative	The current models of knowledge dissemination derived from educational research seem adequate to me	The available resources are sufficient so that we can use research data
Administrative	5.20	4.6	4.20	5	4
Expert in a certain field	5.37	4.5	4.70	3.8	2.75
Executive	5.67	5	4.15	3.75	2.77
Documentation/ Research	5.50	5	4.00	3.5	3.25
Planning	5.50	4.4	4.40	4.2	3
Evaluation	5.67	4	4.67	4.33	2.5
Rating average	5.48	4.58	4.35	4.09	3.04

Table 2. Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements (On a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 represents 'complete disagreement' and 6 represents 'complete agreement').

Policymakers' interaction with research results:

- the majority of respondents **disagree with the fact that the available resources are sufficient for them to use research data**, which might be a reason why research **evidence is not always used when formulating, initiating or evaluating** an educational policy initiative;
- the administrative staff tend to agree that the **current methods of knowledge dissemination** derived from educational research **seem adequate**, even though they are least exposed to research results and usage, while by comparison **those more directly involved with research are more reserved on this particular topic**



1. Internal factors influencing the uptake of research by policymakers

Sources used in the past 12 months	Publicati on in scientific journals	Public opinion	Empley es of my own institutio n	Newspap ers, magazine s, web pages	TV and radio	Previous professio nal experien ce	Students	Organiza tions and professio nal associati ons	Formal meetings with research ers at scientific events	Informal meetings with research ers	National and internati onal statisti cal database s	Universit y database s	National agencies' reports
Administrative	4.40	2.40	3.80	3.80	2.60	5.00	3.00	4.40	4.60	4.60	4.60	3.80	4.00
Expert in a certain field	4.15	3.37	3.65	3.40	2.95	4.89	3.65	4.10	4.50	4.50	5.15	4.25	4.95
Executive	4.31	3.46	4.31	3.38	2.62	5.00	3.00	4.08	4.46	4.23	4.77	4.15	4.77
Documentation / Research	4.25	3.00	4.00	2.75	2.75	5.00	4.00	4.50	4.75	5.50	5.50	4.50	5.25
Planning	4.56	3.44	4.22	3.89	3.22	5.00	3.22	4.22	4.33	4.67	5.33	4.33	5.22
Evaluation	5.00	3.00	4.17	3.33	2.83	5.33	4.00	4.33	4.50	4.33	5.50	4.83	5.33
Rating average	4.44	3.11	4.02	3.42	2.82	5.03	3.47	4.27	4.52	4.63	5.14	4.31	4.92

Table 3. How relevant are the following sources of information for the educational policy decisions you have made in the last 12 months? (On a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 represents 'low relevance' and 6 represents 'high relevance').

Policymakers' sources of information:

- the most relevant sources appear to be **national and international statistical databases and national agencies' reports**;
- they are **more familiar with institutional reports and raw data** issued by national or international organizations and not by researchers in higher education;
- they **rely heavily on their previous professional experience** thus underlining the contribution of experiential learning to the development of professional knowledge and **the need for them to be more involved in the research process** in order to expand and use their knowledge in the field.



1. Internal factors influencing the uptake of research by policymakers

Situations in which research data were used	Educational research has been used to project and implement educational policies and programs	Educational research has been used to influence the way in which decision-makers reflect upon different educational aspects	Educational research has been used to introduce new aspects on the political agenda	Educational research has been used to justify or legitimize options already chosen by the decision-makers
Role within the Institution				
Administrative	4.40	3.80	3.60	3.75
Expert in a certain field	4.00	3.47	3.26	3.67
Executive	4.15	4.08	3.38	3.36
Documentation/ Research	4.00	3.75	3.75	4.50
Planning	4.00	3.70	3.50	3.89
Evaluation	4.00	3.33	3.33	3.00
Rating average	4.09	3.68	3.47	3.69

Table 4. *When you access and use educational research in decision-making, how frequently do you encounter the following situations? (On a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 represents 'never' and 6 represents 'always').*

Policymakers' usage of research results:

- The researchers' proactivity is reflected in policymakers **receiving results of research carried out by higher education institutions or research center**;
- Policymakers who tend to read and analyse research reports are **mostly executives and those working in evaluation**; whereas the latter are less likely to directly receive results from researchers, they appear to use research more in their work. Therefore, they should be among those targeted in the dissemination process;
- Respondents **do not feel very encouraged by their colleagues/peers to use research data in their activity**, which reflects a rather low value attributed to organizational factors in relation to research use.

2. External factors influencing the uptake of research by policymakers

Focus on:

- policymakers' general involvement in research studies
 - the strength and nature of the relationship between researchers (particularly in higher education) and policymakers.
- **lack of training in the field of research utilization** (M: 4.06), indicating the necessity and utility of such an activity in supporting and encouraging the use of research in policymaking;
 - **need to increase access to policymakers**, considered to be relatively low given the **lack of sufficient forums and networks that could bring together researchers in HEIs and policymakers** (M: 3.96), also reflected in a rather low average of policymakers receiving results of research carried out by universities or research centers (M: 3.87).



2. External factors influencing the uptake of research by policymakers

Statement	I had the opportunity to use data which otherwise would have been difficult to access	I have extended the number of contacts within the academia	Research partnerships have contributed to attracting supplementary financing sources for the institution I work with	Such partnerships have offered me the opportunity to improve my expertise in the field	Partnerships in research have helped me advance in my career	Such projects helped me be pragmatic and realistic with regard to research results	Research partnerships have helped be better understand the work of researchers	Research partnerships helped me be more motivated in relation to the work I am doing
Role within the institution								
Administrative	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.60	3.40	3.60	3.60
Expert in a certain field	3.80	3.70	3.26	3.55	3.58	3.80	3.85	3.84
Executive	3.77	4.23	3.62	4.00	3.83	3.92	3.67	4.00
Documentation / Research	3.50	3.75	3.25	3.25	3.50	4.00	3.75	4.00
Planning	3.22	3.50	3.25	3.25	3.50	3.67	3.56	3.75
Evaluation	3.50	4.00	3.17	3.17	3.33	3.83	3.67	3.83
Rating average	3.54	3.78	3.34	3.45	3.55	3.77	3.68	3.83

Table 5. How do you appreciate the collaboration with higher education institutions in your professional activity? Please express your agreement in relation to the following statements (from 1 representing 'strong disagreement' to 5 representing 'strong agreement').

Collaboration between policymakers and higher education institutions:

- influenced by **the rather limited access to policymakers**, as well as by the **different agendas and timeframes** for research and for decision-making;
- partnerships with universities are highly regarded** by policymakers, indicating they have a motivational and commitment role, as research partnerships appear to help some of the respondents be **more motivated** in relation to the work they are doing, and to **extend the number of contacts** with universities;
- general openness** towards working in projects developed in collaboration with HEIs and strengthening the relationship.

3.a. Factors encouraging policymakers to make educational policy decisions based on scientific evidence

- **personal factors** (intrinsic motivation):
 - personal desire to improve their expertise;
 - professional responsibility;
- **results-driven factors** (extrinsic motivation):
 - in relation to the decision-makers - the possibility to influence decisions or substantiate pertinent argumentation that could help adopt policy
 - in relation to the system - obtaining long-term positive results and ensuring objectivity in making decisions;
- **general factors** (based on existing evidence):
 - the decreasing quality of the educational process;
 - the increase in the drop-out rate;
- **research-related factors**:
 - the need to access highly accurate data, based on rigorous and realistic research, objectivity and sample representativeness.

3.b. Factors discouraging policymakers to make educational policy decisions based on scientific evidence

- **systemic factors**
 - public sphere inertia;
 - lack of coherence in designing strategies;
 - the numerous changes in the system;
 - the lack of thematic research in the national context;
- **institutional factors**
 - the lack of institutional or practical culture in the field for using results of research and innovation in the field, as well as at the level of decision-making;
- **research-related factors**
 - lack of correlation between theory and practice;
 - the risk of over-theorized research;
 - barriers in the access to evidence.



Conclusions



Conclusions (1)

- Despite the **weak presence of national regulations regarding the support of evidence-based decisions in education**, public servants **highly value** the research contributions and agree that research makes them **more confident** in their decisions and has implications on the quality of their work (Levin, 2011);
- However, policymakers still consider their **professional experience** as one of the **main source of knowledge** when decisions are made;
- The findings reveal **the role of personal and organisational factors** in influencing the research utilisation as an organisational dynamic and its internal structures, but also highlight **the role of the existing research culture** in the institution. **The research culture** is a critical aspect and is linked to the group dynamic in the organization (Ion & Iucu, 2014) and **the support of colleagues and leaders**.
- Highlight on **the importance of training policymakers** in order to increase their level of awareness in the use of data derived from research.

Conclusions (2)

- There appears to be a **contrast** between the **actual and perceived identity** of the policymaker.
 - even though in charge of drafting, implementing and evaluating policies, **do not necessarily perceive themselves as decision-makers**, a role which they mostly **attribute to elected or appointed officials** in their field.
- their **preference is mostly driven by the decision-making agenda** and less by particular topics of interest;
- their **preferences appear to be highly volatile and influenced by the political factor**.



Conclusions (3)

As it can be inferred from the findings, educational research in **Romania is currently at a crossroad** between:

- **the science push model** – HEIs are attempting to influence the research agenda and disseminate their results;
- and **the demand pull model** – policymakers are attempting to draft evidence-base policies, without always being able to find the necessary evidence, as their policy interests are not yet harmonized with the research interests of HEIs (the main research producers).

Even more so, the demand pull model sometimes implies that the policymakers are looking at evidence to justify their decisions rather than inform them, which creates an even larger rift between the two parties.



Conclusions (4)

- **Future areas of research:**
 - Our research paves the way for an in-depth analysis of **organizational factors** likely to affect research utilisation:
 - engagement, interpreted as the attitude of organizations and their members towards research;
 - the political and managerial context likely to promote and favour research transfer and use;
 - the financial context needed to foster quality results.
- **Limitations:**
 - Whereas the study tackles the idea of bridging the gap between the policymakers' and researchers' contexts, it cannot provide at this stage a full understanding of how an efficient partnership could be defined;
 - However, it provides us with a sense of the policymakers' positive perception regarding the collaboration with researchers in HEIs and it shapes potential guidelines for the latter to strengthen this relation.

Conclusions (5)

Recommendations:

For higher education – research, teaching and learning:

- HEIs could potentially be **more proactive** in disseminating research results, specifically:
 - targeting executive and policy evaluation staff in public institutions;
 - creating formal and informal contexts for meeting their counterparts;
 - developing training programmes (initial and continuous) aimed at:
 - interpreting and understanding research results;
 - applying research results in drafting educational policy;
 - facilitating research utilization in public institutions, engaging not only instruments related to research utilization, but also to teaching and learning.
- As research is an essential part of the declared and assumed mission of higher education, strengthening the research component of **initial training** in HE could contribute to:
 - its increased visibility and relevance;
 - better prepared graduates – later becoming better informed research producers, users and mediators;
 - shaping a clearer role for research as an overall strategy to develop the higher education system.



Conclusions (6)

- **General implications:**
 - at the macro-systemic level of educational policies: the focus on the role of research is shifting from the symbolic use of research results to **evidence-based policy**;
 - **the transparency policies** promoted by the Romanian higher education system are **still vague and incoherent**;
 - the political implications may address the quality assurance mechanisms likely to assess and approve research results. This should **stimulate the transfer of research locally, regionally and internationally**.
 - 'Mapping' mechanisms must be implemented, as well as fair opportunities to access research funds and infrastructures.

The links between production and use contexts on both formal and informal levels may add value to the relationship between research production and its transfer and use.

Thus, it may improve the sense of responsibility of both parties as long as the relationship is based on **equality, mutual respect and shared responsibilities**.



**Closing the Circle:
Research and Policymaking in Education**

Thank you!

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