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# An Affirmative-diffractive Re-reading of the Policy Instrumentation Approach Through Agential Realism and the Accreditation Instrument

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## **An affirmative-diffractive re-reading of the policy instrumentation approach through agential realism and the accreditation instrument**

### **Abstract**

*Inspired by the ‘material turn’ in the social sciences, education scholars have engaged in discussions on various materialist modes of policy analysis for a long time now. This paper continues these discussions by experimenting with an agential realist re-reading of the instrumentation approach originally proposed by Lascoumes & Le Gales. Through an affirmative-diffractive methodology, the paper suggests that policy instruments can be conceptualized as socio-technical, entangled, and performative instruments that produce distinctive discursive-material effects by virtue of their particular capacities. This conceptualization continues key features of the original instrumentation approach, while contributing a concept of instrument capacities and amplifying the importance of the material and ontological character of the performative effects of policy instruments and their entanglement with policy content and wider sets of policies. By including the empirical case of higher education accreditation in the re-reading, the article offers an approach capable of analyzing how policy instruments contribute to the crafting of the ontological constitution of the university in alignment with the standards and practices produced by the accreditation instrument. The article suggests that the realities currently being invoked by instruments such as accreditation seem to reconfigure – and diminish – the very *raison d’être* of the university.*

### **Keywords**

Policy analysis, instrumentation approach, accreditation as policy instrument, agential realism, diffraction

### **Introduction: Policy analysis and the material turn**

Over the course of the past decades, thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Karen Barad have argued that discourses have material consequences and that ‘matter’ has agency (Hekman 2008; Jackson and Mazzei 2012). This movement within the social sciences represents a demand for more materialist modes of analysis across disciplines such as anthropology, economics, political science, sociology, and education (Coole and Frost 2010; Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Hinton and Treusch 2015; Schostak and Schostak 2008). The arguments related to the ‘material turn’ are also relevant in policy studies, where scholars have discussed the potentials of various approaches to materialist modes of policy analysis (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Braun et al. 2011; Carusi, Rawlins, and Ashton 2018; Riveros and Viczko 2015; Heimans 2012; Singh, Heimans, and Glasswell 2014). This paper continues this discussion by proposing an exploration of the policy instrumentation approach as one way of including the agency of matter in policy analysis.

For many social scientists, the turn towards ‘how matter comes to matter’ (Barad 2007) is shaped by a critique of what they understand as the linguistic turn.

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretive turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every ‘thing’ – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. [...] Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that doesn’t seem to matter anymore is matter (Barad 2007: 132)

Already during the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s, we can observe critiques of the role of language and the concept of ‘reality’ in the social sciences. In Latour’s important work from 1993, *We Have Never Been Modern*, he posed a rhetorical question: ‘Are you not fed up at finding yourself locked into language alone, or imprisoned in social representation alone, as so many social scientists would like you to be?’ (Latour 1993: 90). A few years prior to this critique, in 1991, Haraway expressed the critique of a ‘radical social constructionist program’ and suggested balancing between the historical contingency of knowledge and faithful accounts of the real world (Haraway 1991: 185, 187).

These types of critiques seem to strongly imply that the privilege of language has functioned as a stronghold in which any notion of materiality (and reality) was denied access. However, it can also be argued that these critiques do not do the work of the 1960s French philosophers such as Foucault and Derrida justice. Upon a closer examination, they did not seem to neglect the notion of materiality as such (see also Ahmed 2010; Brøgger 2018; Hekman 2008). As Derrida phrases it, materialism is important and only becomes problematic if it is privileged as *the only* point of departure, if it is claimed that matter is alone and constitutes an objective reality (Derrida 1982: 64-65). Regardless of the hint of a straw man argument behind it, the legacy of so-called post-structuralism was the privileging of language. Since then, the critique of the privileging of mind over matter has manifested itself quite strongly, but also differently, in various (overlapping and entangled) branches of the social sciences ranging from non-representational theory and material-semiotic methods such as actor-network theory and science and technology studies (Callon 1986, 2010; Haraway 1988; Latour 2005; Law and Hassard 1999; Thrift 2008), through (feminist) philosophical accounts (Ahmed 2010; Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2007; Braidotti 2013; Coole and Frost 2010; Haraway 1991; Hekman 2008), and anthropological accounts of post-humanist, multispecies ethnography or material practices (Despret 2005; Mol 2002; Tsing 2012), to new/socio-material elaborations in education studies (Braidotti et al. 2018; Brøgger 2019; Carusi, Rawlins, and Ashton 2018; Fenwick and Edwards 2011; Heimans 2012; Hickey-Moody, Palmer, and Sayers 2016; Landi and Safron 2020; Madsen 2021; Riveros and Viczko 2015; Webb and Gulson 2015).

The renewed analytical interest in materiality (without leaving behind discourse) is an important overall challenge to the research field of policy analysis. In this article we propose that an affirmative-diffractive re-reading of the policy instrumentation approach offers a contribution to the effort to develop policy analysis through the material turn. Already in Lascoumes and Le Gales' theorization, the instrumentation approach attaches importance to the material dimensions of policy analysis. The instrumentation approach argues that policy instruments are not merely functional technical solutions at our disposal, pragmatically chosen for their effectiveness in solving a particular policy problem. Instead, instrument designs encompass particular theorizations of governance relations and of how to govern, and furthermore imply specific effects on these governance relations:

A **public policy instrument** constitutes a device that is both technical and social, that organizes specific social relations between the state and those it is addressed to, according to the representations and meanings it carries. It is a particular type of institution, a technical device with the generic purpose of carrying a concrete concept of the politics/society relationship and sustained by a concept of regulation. (Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007: 4, original emphasis)

The focus on the *instrumentation* of public policy proposed by Lascoumes & Le Gales thus adds a significant perspective to the analysis of policy. This approach provides an important insight into how policy instruments are never neutral devices but produce specific effects and bring about certain kinds of both social and professional control (Brøgger 2018; Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007: 3). The approach has inspired several education scholars in the analysis of public policy instruments, including public websites displaying evidence on schools (Decuyper, Ceulemans, & Simons, 2014), the PISA test and its intertwining of ideas and agencies (Carvalho 2014), and digital interfaces displaying interactive data visualizations (Williamson 2016). Nevertheless, while an instrumentation approach to policy analysis can be seen as a turn towards the material dimensions of policy, focusing on the instrument as a material entity, the original conceptualization of policy instruments by Lascoumes and Le Gales seems to highlight the discursive power of these instruments as more than technical devices that embody implicit social and political governance theories and have discursive effects. In this article we experiment with reading the instrumentation approach diffractively through the material turn and the materiality of a specific policy instrument, and thus we explore the possibilities of a material re-tooling of the approach. We are inspired by Karen Barad's version of these new materialist developments, which she terms 'agential realism' (Barad 2007: 44).

## **Methodology**

We embark on our agential realist re-tooling of the instrumentation approach by adopting an affirmative-diffractive methodology of reading the instrumentation approach *through* agential realism and the materiality of a specific policy instrument. The notion of diffraction originates in physics and has been refined by Barad, who finds inspiration in Haraway (Barad 2007, 2014). Diffraction is used to describe patterns of difference that emerge when matter encounters matter,

like when waves bend and spread when they encounter an obstacle such as a rock. As a methodological approach, this idea describes the patterns of difference that emerge when two or more theories, concepts, methodologies, empirical phenomena, or other materials encounter each other. In our case, the encounter is between three elements. The first element is the instrumentation approach, mainly as it appears in the original introduction by Lascoumes and Le Gales (2007), but also as it materializes in three studies that have adopted the approach (Carvalho 2014; Decuypere, Ceulemans, and Simons 2014; Williamson 2016). The second element is the theory on agential realism, mainly as it appears in Barad's major work *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). Finally, the third element is the specific policy instrument of Danish higher education accreditation as it appears in steering documents and administrative documents, as well as more than 40 interviews with policy makers, accreditation executives, university leaders, teachers, students, and quality officers, and comprehensive observation studies at three Danish universities, all collected during the years 2011-2021 in research projects on the Bologna Process, graduate employability policies, institutional quality assurance and transnational and national accreditation initiatives and procedures (Brøgger 2019; Madsen 2019). Importantly, a diffractive methodology is not about mapping differences, but about mapping the *effects* of differences ( Hvenegård-Lassen and Staunæs 2021; Thiele 2014). In our re-reading of the instrumentation approach, this means that we do not focus on showing how the instrumentation approach differs from agential realism. Instead, we seek to show how the instrumentation approach can be conceptualized differently when encountering agential realism and the materiality of a specific empirical instrument. Diffracting the instrumentation approach through a theory and an empirical instrument allows us to think about the materiality of instrumentation differently. The purpose of these diffractive readings is to contribute a 'critique beyond criticism', an affirmative critique which is preoccupied not with discarding the original instrumentation approach, but with continuing the thinking of Lascoumes and Le Gales and further fertilizing it with key concepts developed from the encounter with agential realism and the accreditation instrument. This is the reason that we include 'affirmative' in our diffractive methodology. An affirmative critique acknowledges what already exists *and* points out what could be different (Foucault 1997, Staunæs 2016). With our affirmative-diffractive re-reading, we thus seek to acknowledge the important contribution of Lascoumes and Le Gales and further develop it with additional conceptualizations.

The article will progress by first offering a diffractive reading of the instrumentation approach through agential realism. Here we introduce key concepts from agential realism that constitute our reading of agential realism. Following this, we engage these key concepts with the instrumentation approach in order to formulate a proposed definition of the instrumentation approach as it might look in its encounter with agential realism. After this, the article conducts a tentative diffractive reading of the first diffraction through an empirical case by introducing the empirical instrument of higher education accreditation. We explore how our proposed definition changes when it is brought into conversation with this instrument. In the concluding discussion, we perform the third and final diffractive reading of the results of our material re-tooling of the instrumentation approach through three previous empirical studies of policy instruments in order to explicitly show what difference the agential realist re-reading of the instrumentation approach makes in instrumentation analyses. Through these three diffractive readings, we seek to keep the instrumentation approach alive by contributing to its continuous becoming as a methodological approach. This continuous becoming, we argue, may emerge from its conversation with agential realism and the accreditation instrument.

### **Agential realist understandings of the becoming of the world**

In agential realism, ongoing processes of becoming constitute reality. Inspired by quantum physics, French philosophy, and queer and feminist studies, Barad understands the initial state of the world as an entangled state of indeterminacy and inseparability, which only separates into particular, specific phenomena and entities through agential processes (Barad 2007: 333). Particular and specific manifestations of reality, also known as ontologies of the world, are thereby products of practices and doings (Barad 2007: 28). The agential realist concept of ontology entails how ontologies are crafted into being through practices (Barad 2007: 338-339; Hekman 2008). Thus, this position introduces a performative notion of practices: that different practices matter, and that the world simply materializes differently through different practices (Barad 2007:89). Reality does not precede practices. Instead, in continuation of other scholars of the material turn such as Mol and Thrift, reality is enacted through practices (Mol 1999, Thrift 2008).

In order to grasp how reality emerges out of entanglements, Barad introduces the notion of ‘agential cuts’. Agential cuts can be described as momentary arrests of the state of indeterminacy and inseparability, through which boundaries between entities are established and the entities are

ascribed matter and meaning (Barad 2007: 339). These cuts are not enacted once and for all (Barad, 2007: 179). They are iteratively produced. With the iteration of agential cuts performed in practices and doings, the world materializes in particular, dynamic, and contingent ways. This notion of how the world materializes implies a re-thinking of what is real, which is already indicated in Barad's concept of agential realism. The real is not simply there, but is constantly becoming as a result of processes of separation and enactments of relations between, and properties of, entities. The agential realist re-thinking of reality hence implies a shift in research interest from a mapping of reality to a mapping of the becoming of reality and the performative processes involved in producing reality in particular ways. Our interest in policy instruments lies in their performative production of reality through the practices and doings performed by and in relation to these instruments. A focus on the performative processes draws our attention to how phenomena come into being, how they are enacted (Brøgger 2018).

The neologism of *performativity* was used moderately and infrequently before the launch of queer theory in the 1990s; for example in Lyotard's work from 1979, *La condition postmoderne* (Lyotard 1979 [1996]). However, it was not until Butler's work *Gender Trouble* from 1990 that performativity was launched as an influential theory (Brøgger 2019; Butler 1999; Staunæs, Brøgger, and Krejsler 2018). Among others, Butler draws on Derrida and his modification of Austin's speech act theory (Miller 2007). In many ways, the most accurate definition of Butler's understanding of performativity can be found in her 1993 work, *Bodies that Matter*. Here Butler frames performativity as a 'reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names' (Butler 1993: 2). This means that particular practices, ways of doing things, produce reality (Brøgger 2018). Even though both Butler and Barad understand discourse in the widest sense, encompassing not only linguistic practices but also (for instance) bodily practices, we suggest that Barad widens Butler's definition of performativity by factoring in and amplifying the agency of matter. By re-configuring discourse as material-discursive practices, Barad operates with a performative notion of matter: she simply assigns matter an active status in the practices that produce performative effects. Following Barad's novel terminology, 'matter kicks back'! (Barad 2007, 2010). The concept of performativity allows us to explore the ways in which policy instruments are involved in the creation, shaping and (re)configuring of the world (Brøgger 2019; Madsen 2020). Different policy instruments do not merely offer different perspectives on a world

that is indirectly and often inadvertently assumed to be there. Instead, they enact different *worlds* and not merely *world-views* through material-discursive practices (Fenwick and Edwards 2011).

### **Experimenting with an agential realist re-reading of policy instruments**

In our first diffractive reading of the instrumentation approach, we are testing out what the approach may look like when theoretical concepts from agential realism are brought into conversation with the idea of doing policy analysis by analyzing policy instrumentation. At the outset, we should note that the idea of an instrumentation approach, and thereby the separation of policy instrumentation from policy content and aim, is already a move that may appear counter-intuitive from an agential realist perspective, given the emphasis on the initially entangled state of the world. We will return to this matter towards the end of the article, but for now note that we see the separation as a specific cut, or in other words as our enactment of the concept of policy. The instrumentation approach originally suggested by Lascoumes and Le Gales (2007) co-produces policy as a phenomenon with aim and medium as its main properties. In our affirmative re-reading, the cut that separates out the instrument as one component of a policy enables policy analyses that add an extra layer of implicit policy content to the analysis, thereby making aspects of the policy visible that remain invisible in a content analysis. We therefore find that the cut between policy content and instrument is productive as an analytical distinction in the sense that it makes aspects of policy that are normally hidden visible.

Based on this acknowledgement, we propose a tentative agential realist conceptualization of the policy instrument as a *socio-technical, entangled, and performative instrument that produces distinctive discursive-material effects by virtue of its particular capacities*. This definition draws affirmatively on key features of the original Lascoumes and Le Gales conceptualization of public policy instruments, including the technical/material and social character of the instrument, and the emphasis on its discursive effects. However, when these features are read diffractively through agential realism, they gain a slightly different meaning. First, while Lascoumes and Le Gales talk about the policy instrument as ‘a device that is both technical and social’ (Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007: 4), we term it a ‘socio-technical’ device in order to accentuate the interlinked relation between the technical or functionalist operational quality of the instrument and the ways in which it organizes social and political power relations. In our reading, social relations are produced owing to the technical properties of the instrument, and in turn these properties cannot be imagined outside

the boundaries of existing social relations. Second, while Lascoumes and Le Gales include both materiality and discursivity (in the wording of representations, meanings, and concepts) in their conceptualization of the instrument, they tend to confine the materiality of the instrument to its technical aspects. We would like to move beyond this limited scope of the materiality of the instrument by also conceptualizing the effects of policy instruments as discursive-material, and by suggesting that these effects have real consequences in the sense that they contribute to the crafting of reality in particular ways. In extension of this slightly modified continuation of key features of the policy instrument pointed out by Lascoumes and Le Gales, we suggest that we should 1) add a concept of the *capacities* that constitute a particular instrument, 2) incorporate the study of *performative, discursive-material effects* produced by these capacities, and 3) introduce an amplified notion of the *entangled* nature of policy instruments like the ones very generally discussed by Lascoumes and Le Gales. This re-reading entails a different understanding of the effects produced by the choice of instrument as not merely installing particular world-views or perspectives on governance, but rather producing different materializations of the world. The diffractive patterns emerging from this re-reading of the notion of effects proposed by Lascoumes and Le Gales emphasize the performative power of the instrument in question – how it evokes certain realities, that is, new ontologies for the governed institutions.

Other aspects of policy instruments, such as an emphasis on the multiple enactments of various policy instruments in specific contexts, could also have been part of this definition. However, this is already accounted for within the larger framework of policy studies in education that frame performative approaches through the notion of enactment (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Braun et al. 2011; Carusi, Rawlins, and Ashton 2018; Heimans 2012; Riveros and Viczko 2015; Singh, Heimans, and Glasswell 2014). The important notion of enactment calls for methodological sensitivity by highlighting how analyzing policy (and a policy instrument) always involves the selection of particular enactments or materializations of that policy, as the instrument changes slightly from one enactment to another. We address particular enactments of the accreditation instrument at the international, national, and institutional level in the paragraphs below. However, in the remainder of the article, we focus on the contributions emerging from our agential realist re-reading of the instrumentation approach.

### **The instrument of higher education accreditation as an illustrative case**

In order to explore and specify these contributions, we will now diffract them with a particular policy instrument, namely the instrument of accreditation, exemplified through Danish higher education. The Danish case reflects both general characteristics of an international higher education policy instrument, and specific enactments of this instrument in a particular governance context, constituted by regional, national, and local characteristics. Scandinavian and Central European states can be broadly characterized by their high levels of trust, low distance of power between hierarchical levels, and decentralized authority distributed across public administrative levels and functions (Loughlin and Peters 1997). In Denmark all higher education institutions, including the universities, are formally self-governing institutions independent of direct state interference, and primarily regulated through sector-specific laws and regulations (Brøgger 2021; Ministry of Finance 2009; Ørberg and Wright 2019). The Ministry of Higher Education and Science defines the overall sector-specific regulations. These include regulations concerning the admission of students, the structure of studies, and the programs offered. The institutions are in turn independent and self-governing when it comes to internal financial and strategic priorities, as well as how to organize and design study programs. However, despite the implementation of formal self-governance, several state-based policy instruments are used, in effect, to centrally regulate higher education. Among these instruments is an external quality assurance procedure known as accreditation.

Accreditation is an instrument that spans across European, national, and institutional contexts. While national governments were initially the drivers of the regulation of higher education, this situation changed when quality assurance was lifted up to the European level through the Bologna Process, and reframed as accreditation. Accreditation has been systematically implemented in Europe during the past 20 years as part of establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA); and for higher education institutions in many countries, accreditation is a mandatory precondition for attaining public funding (Cone and Brøgger 2020). The standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA (also known as the ESGs) were adopted by the ministers responsible for higher education within the EHEA in 2005, and a new version was approved at the ministerial conference in Yerevan in 2015 (ENQA 2015). In Denmark, the current accreditation system is based on the Accreditation Act of 2013 with amendments in 2015, 2017, and 2018 (The Accreditation Act. Act no. 173 of 02/03/2018). According to the Accreditation Act,

the Accreditation Council, consisting of nine members, is the decision-making body for the accreditation procedures. This council has the authority to award, conditionally award, or deny the accreditation of higher education programs and institutions. Decisions are made on the basis of accreditation reports prepared by the Danish Accreditation Institution. The Accreditation Council and the Accreditation Institution are appointed by the government. The Accreditation Institution prepares the accreditation reports based on centrally defined criteria (Executive Order on Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions. Executive Order no. 853 of 12/08/2019); and these criteria, outlined in the executive order's appendix 1, follow the ESG from 2015. Assessments are carried out by an accreditation panel and are based on key figures, the institution's self-evaluation report, site visits to the institution, and documentation for the performance of quality assurance in selected areas at the institution. These legal documents, various actors, criteria, and formats for reports, site visits, key figures, and documentation are all part of the accreditation instrument, in addition to the ESG.

In the following sections, we will delve more deeply into selected aspects of the Danish implementation of the accreditation instrument, as these allow us to open our definition of policy instruments and add complexity and specificity to it. Our specifications and definitions are of course situated in specific theoretical and empirical interests (Haraway 1988), and we invite further explorations and analytical experiments that might add and/or subtract components to/from our tentative proposed agential realist conceptualization of policy instruments.

### ***Instrument capacities***

We begin our diffraction of the agential realist re-reading of the instrumentation approach with the accreditation instrument by discussing the concept of instrument capacities. This concept articulates that a given policy instrument has certain capacities that define the instrument and how it operates across various contexts. These capacities constitute the instrument and its performative character, and thus its 'doings' in the world. The concept of 'instrument capacities' denotes some of the same aspects of a policy as the concept of 'enablement', proposed by Carusi, Rawlins, and Ashton (2018: 356-358). An instrument capacity enables particular realities to unfold, and particular ontologies to be evoked. However, while the concept of enablement seems to refer to the contexts that allow certain policies to come into being and not others, our concept of instrument

capacities refers to how the policy instrument enables certain ontologies and prevents others, instead.

If we read the concept of instrument capacities through the accreditation instrument, two main capacities appear. The first instrument capacity is the unleashing of an entire conjunction of processes and actors triggered when an institution becomes enrolled in the accreditation instrument. The conjunction of processes and actors ensures that the instrument enrolls higher education institutions, including all actors within the institution, deeply in the accreditation process. For example, the Danish accreditation instrument involves institutional self-evaluation reports, which are supposed to describe how the accreditation criteria are met across the entire institution, including specifications of internal institutional differences. The reports are not only intended to describe how the institution fulfils these criteria on paper. The institution must also show that its system works in practice and ensures the quality and relevance of programs before, during and after institutional accreditation (The Danish Accreditation Institution 2020). This is shown, for instance, through an exhaustive documentation of all quality assurance processes at all hierarchical levels of the institution, and through site visits during which the accreditation panel interviews heads, teachers, students, and employer representatives. Before the site visits, the accreditation panel selects a number of ‘audit trails’, which focus either on specific accreditation criteria, or on specific parts of the organization. The unpredictability involved in the audit process leading up to the final assessment entails that the institutions are encouraged to stretch themselves to live up to the accreditation criteria in all possible ways. These formats imply that by virtue of its design, the accreditation instrument has the capacity to penetrate almost all institutional processes.

The second capacity of the accreditation instrument derives from the mode of operation built into its design. The revision of the Accreditation Act in 2013 changed the system from program accreditation to institutional accreditation (The Accreditation Act. Act no. 173 of 02/03/2018). While the Ministry of Higher Education and Science is responsible for implementing the act, the act places responsibility for ensuring the quality of higher education on the institutions and their management. Institutional accreditation implies that institutions are required to establish their own institutional quality assurance system. However, this system must live up to the criteria for quality defined in the executive order (Executive Order on Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions. Executive Order no. 853 of 12/08/2019). In effect, the institutions can design their own quality assurance systems as long as they fully comply with the nationally defined criteria based on the

international ESG. By holding the institutions responsible for developing their own quality assurance system, the institutions are co-opted into shared goals, including particular standards and quality assurance practices. The incentives are strong and convincing, since the sanctions involved if institutions fail to obtain a positive accreditation are powerful and far-reaching: a decision giving conditionally positive accreditation entails that all new programs must be externally accredited before they are established; in cases of denied accreditation, higher education institutions cannot establish any new programs, and existing programs must be accredited in accordance with a roster plan (The Accreditation Act. Act no. 173 of 02/03/2018; The Danish Accreditation Institution 2020). This incentive-based dynamic enrolls the institutions themselves to become standard-setting agents. Assuring education quality implies that the institutions are incentivized to *want* what they *have to do* (Brøgger 2016). The institutions actively need to set standards and incorporate them into their own practice (Madsen 2019). Hence, accreditation manifests as an instrument with a powerful capacity to mobilize higher education institutions. It enrolls institutions as co-producers of accreditation policy.

With reference to these empirical examples, we suggest that the specific design of a policy instrument implies certain capacities that allow the instrument to organize the social governance and power relations between various actors (institutions, agencies, the state, and in addition inter-organizational units and layers), with effects on most institutional practices. As suggested above, the capacity of the instrument to organize social and professional relations in particular ways is embedded in the technical design of panels, visits, documentation requirements, and rather open accreditation criteria that enroll the institutions in standard-setting. The organized governance and power relations can be seen as a separate policy agenda that adds to the explicit aims and contents of a policy, for example the ways in which a policy agenda on institutional responsibility adds to the explicit policy agenda on higher education quality. The relation between this additional policy agenda and the political intentions behind the choice of policy instrument is complex, as the instrument may be selected specifically for its instrumental capacities, and may therefore be seen as a rational way of achieving specific governance aims, such as institutional responsibility. However, we do not consider the instrument capacities (as analyzed empirically) to be fully overlapping with the instrumental purposes of the instrumentation. Looking back at the formal justifications of the transition from program accreditation to institutional accreditation in 2013, the need for an extended institutional freedom through a simplification and de-bureaucratization of the

accreditation system was emphasized (Minister of Research Innovation and Higher Education 2013). This justification partly overlaps, but also partly differs from, the instrument capacity of enrolling all institutional actors and responsabilizing higher education institutions in the development and consolidation of quality assurance. Hence, the concept of instrument capacities implies that the performativity of policy instruments may differ from and entail something more than the intended, instrumental purposes of selecting a particular instrument.

***Performative discursive-material effects of instrumentation***

The performativity of policy instrumentation is in itself an important matter which is highlighted in our tentative definition of policy instruments, and which develops as it is diffracted through the accreditation instrument. We see performativity as closely related to what Lascoumes and Le Gales refer to as the *effects* of instrumentation. In their conceptualization of policy instruments, they highlight that policy instruments ‘produce specific effects, independent of their stated objectives’, including representing and problematizing an issue in a certain way that not only forces actors to work on the issue in particular ways, but is also relatively durable or characterized by inertia (Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007: 10). When we specifically attend to the materiality of these effects, we find that their inertia becomes more tangible and visible. For example, in the case of accreditation, the setup of the Danish Accreditation Institution at a specific address in Copenhagen, with a number of employees who go to work and perform specific tasks every day, has the effect of crafting accreditation as a part of reality. The office and the employees are material effects of the accreditation instrument and practices, and their materiality provides the inertia of accreditation, since the institution cannot be removed again without a certain effort and at a high cost. At the individual universities, accreditation similarly materializes as the establishment or consolidation of quality units and the employment of particular staff members, who gradually become constitutive of a new profession of quality workers in higher education. This materialization process is a result of the instrument capacity to enroll and responsabilize institutions in co-producing instrument practices. Quality units and people, with their specific roles and practices, are material effects of the accreditation instrument. These material effects add to the discursive effects highlighted by Lascoumes and Le Gales, including a problematization of quality and an implied reconfiguration of quality as an area subject to political and administrative intervention. Through the iterative material-discursive practices embedded in the mechanics of an

instrument, the policy instrument creates a range of phenomena which are empirically visible as materializations and conceptions.

However, our affirmative, diffractive re-reading of the instrumentation approach through agential realism includes not only an expansion of the effects proposed by Lascoumes and Le Gales to include the material as well as the discursive, but also a leap towards the crafting of new ontologies. In the case of accreditation, the instrument contributes to the crafting of a new governance ontology of soft governance, in which the governed institutions become co-creators of the policy and thereby part of the crafting mechanics of the accreditation instrument. In doing so, the institutions themselves set and further cultivate the standards that they simultaneously obey. Or put differently, they become active producers of what they also comply with. The accreditation instrument also contributes to the crafting of a reconfiguration of the ontology of higher education quality, which we will elaborate further in the next section on the entangled nature of the instrument. In sum, these specific, empirically observable discursive and material effects of policy instrumentation contribute to the constitution of a new university ontology, in which the university is constituted as a phenomenon comprehensively penetrated by accreditation practices and standards. Thus, read through the accreditation instrument, the tangible performative effects can be viewed as a myriad of enactments that together, through processes of contestation and gradual alignment, generate this new university ontology, for example when quality workers and the allocation of resources turn universities into agencies with an active will to co-produce the accreditation policy, or when new departments, committees, chains of command, documentation procedures, online systems, and templates are simultaneously implemented in line with the logic of accreditation, and thereby conjointly reconfigure the constitution of the university as an institution.

***The entanglements of policy instrumentation with policy content and wider sets of policy***

A third important concept in our definition of policy instruments that resulted from the first diffractive reading is *entanglement*. When reading the agential realist instrumentation approach through the accreditation instrument, it becomes clear that the instrument does not stand alone, but is entangled with both policy content and wider sets of related policies, and that the policy content gains specific properties by virtue of the instrumentation. In the accreditation instrument, the content of quality assurance and improvement emerges in a very particular way through the

accreditation instrument. The concept of quality is not mentioned in either the Act, the Executive Order, or the *Institutional accreditation 2.0 guidelines* (The Danish Accreditation Institution 2020), which indicate how the accreditation regulations should be interpreted, without also mentioning relevance. The notion of ‘relevance’ is defined as an adaptation of programs to societal developments, as well as to current and future labor market needs and demands. Through the textual practices of coupling quality with relevance, quality and relevance become closely interlinked. Criterion 1 of the three core quality criteria outlined in appendix 1 of the Executive Order on accreditation highlights that the quality assurance procedures of a higher education institution must support the development of the quality and relevance of the programs provided. Also in relation to the pre-qualification of new study programs, the Executive Order strongly emphasizes the importance of labor market needs and relevance in relation to each study program. The existence of these needs should be established by documenting current or future labor market demands and documenting core external stakeholders, including possible employers of future graduates.

In the reality that emerges, quality is commensurate with employability and the labor market relevance of study programs. Good, sound, high-quality education becomes indicative of high employability rates. While relevance can be considered a part of the policy content, the enrolling capacity of the policy instrument provokes a modified and amplified version of relevance, as the universities stretch themselves to live up to the criterion (Degn, Madsen, and Brøgger forthcoming). The policy instrument mobilizes higher education institutions to increase the number of places in programs with good job prospects with regard to both existing and future course provision, and to encourage students to opt out of taking degrees that are less in demand by employers and instead, based on labor market prospects, to choose programs with high graduate employability rates. Accreditation has thus taken over the concept and practice of quality, and is now actively reconfiguring the reality and truth about higher education quality as a matter of labor market relevance. In this way, accreditation has the performative effect of legitimizing the initial political ambition, proposed through the Bologna Process and by the European Commission and later reinforced at the national and institutional level, of enhancing the competitiveness of European higher education and pushing universities towards competence-driven higher education that adapts to the demands of the labor market. The relevance agenda is now not only imposed on the

universities from above, but also driven actively by themselves, as they have become enrolled in setting their own quality (and relevance) standards and implementing them across the institution.

From the perspective of the accreditation instrument, it appears as if the policy instrument and the policy content do work upon each other and thereby contribute to each other's properties. If we return to the agential realist notion of entanglement, the policy emerges as an entanglement of instrument and content (in our specific cut), from where the individual properties of instrument and content emerge. Entanglements are in themselves problematic entities, as the notion of 'an entanglement' entails a partial return to the separability of the world consisting of a collection of individual and separable entanglements. However, when we think through the notion of entanglement, we are enabled to bring forth important relations that add further meaning to a policy. In that sense, the project of this paper, pointing out a policy and a policy instrument is only possible when the entanglement of a wide set of policies, tied together by a multitude of mutual references and preconditions, is temporarily bracketed. The moment these brackets are cancelled, an entire set of policy instruments, such as the national funding scheme, strategic framework contracts, yearly inspections controlling targets and results, and a new common chart of accounts, emerge as a conjoint package of instruments that perform the governance relation between the state and the higher education institutions as essentially defined by the state, despite the formal status of universities as self-governing institutions. Furthermore, completely different policies, such as the Danish policy on the relocation of national workplaces, which dictates that the Danish Accreditation Institution is about to be moved away from the capital to a provincial town, entailing a loss of expertise and perhaps changes in the practices of the Accreditation Institution, affect the accreditation policy in material ways. Thus, based on this diffractive reading, we suggest that an analysis of the policy instrument within the entanglement of the policy content of the policy, as well as wider entanglements of policy instruments and contents, opens up both further ontologies performed by the policy and modifications to the ontologies that appear when the capacities and performativity of the policy instrument are analyzed alone.

### **Concluding discussion**

In this article, we have experimented with reading the public policy instrumentation approach affirmatively-diffractively through agential realism. The result was a definition of policy instruments as socio-technical, entangled, and performative instruments that produce distinctive

discursive-material effects by virtue of their particular capacities – a definition that promotes an emphasis on 1) the performative capacities of instruments, 2) the material and ontological (as well as discursive) character of the performative effects, and 3) the entangled nature of policy instruments with policy content and wider sets of policies. When reading diffractively through the accreditation instrument, it became clear that these three features of policy instruments are themselves entangled. The capacities of an instrument constitute additional, often non-explicit policy agendas in the governed institutions (or subjects), thereby taking part in the crafting of new institutional and educational ontologies. These ontologies affect the explicit aim and content of the policy by adding particular meaning and matter to it, and are themselves forged by the discursive-material effects of the instrument. But the crafted ontologies are also reinforced, and sometimes modified, by other (more or less related) policies and their instruments. An analysis of a policy instrument thus, in our re-reading, entails a close examination of how the instrument materializes, operates and configures the various practices addressed by the instrument, and thereby crafts new ontologies, as well as an attentiveness towards other policies that co-produce these practices.

If we diffract our agential realist re-reading of the instrumentation approach through previous instrumentation analyses in the field of education, it becomes clear that our approach does not break with these but rather suggests modifications and elaborations to the approaches found in these analyses, which all seem to fertilize the instrumentation approach with new materialist perspectives. For example, the approach adopted by Decuypere, Ceulemans and Simons (2014) in their instrumentation analysis combines a Latourian approach of studying how the mechanisms and operations of the websites studied elevate information into evidence with a Foucaultian approach of studying how subjectivities are constituted through these mechanisms and operations. Likewise, Williamson (2016) adopts an STS approach in his instrumentation analysis of infrastructures (data visualizations) shaping the possible actions for students inscribed in anticipatory, predictive, and prescriptive data. In the instrumentation analysis produced by Carvalho (2014), where he shows that as an instrument, PISA is able to circulate among a wide range of actors and takes on multiple forms in order to serve multiple purposes, the new materialist inspiration is not explicit, even though it appears in the analytical take. In conversation with these Latourian-Foucaultian and STS-inspired approaches to the instrumentation approach, our agential realist approach slightly dislocates the focus from crafted subjectivities (such as learners, ‘prosumers’, experts, and secretariats) and objects (such as information, visualizations, and reports) to crafted relations,

practices, and ontologies. While these are all examples of empirical studies focusing on different kinds of policy instruments, our intention has been to theorize and conceptualize, and in this sense our empirical case example merely serves as an illustration. The different character of the policy instruments analyzed in the previous studies just mentioned and our own work prevents us from directly comparing the analytical results gained from the different approaches. However, the studies offered by Decuyper, Ceulemans and Simons, Carvalho, and Williamson all included analyses focusing on the materiality of the instruments (websites, reports, data sets, visualizations) and the mechanisms of the instruments, but less on the crafting of ontologies, the sedimentations of these ontologies through material (and discursive) effects produced by the instruments, and the relations of these instruments to other policies. Nevertheless, as this affirmative-diffractive conversation with other studies has shown, our main contribution is a theoretical and conceptual specification and elaboration of some of the currents already moving within the research field.

With our specific empirical interest in accreditation as a European, national and institutional instrument for higher education quality, we have sought to open up and explore a policy instrument that is highly bureaucratic and institutionally anchored, compared to websites, data visualizations, and PISA tests, but also an instrument that, like these instruments, enrolls the governed subjects (in our case higher education institutions, including all actors within them) as active participants in self-governing. We have indicated how the specific capacities of the accreditation instrument, including its packaging of processes and actors that are triggered conjointly when entering an accreditation process, as well as its enrolment of institutions in standard-setting and self-evaluation, enable it to re-forge and re-configure the ontological constitution of the university in alignment with the standards and practices embedded in and produced by the accreditation instrument. This further material, agential realist exploration demonstrating how the instruments enable certain ontologies and prevent others calls for serious reflection on the performative power of policy instruments. The realities currently being invoked by instruments such as accreditation seem to reconfigure – and diminish – the very *raison d'être* of the university.

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