Developing Indicators for the Evaluation of Research Funding Organisations

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During the last couple of decades or so evaluation, including research evaluation, has become a well institutionalised and wide spread practice. As Georghiou and Roessner note the demand for evaluation '…has been fuelled by the desire to understand the effects of technology policies and programs, to learn from the past and, more instrumentally, to justify the continuation of those policies to a sometimes sceptical audiences.' (Georghiou and Roessner, 2000) Evaluation is extensively used in all areas of policy – particularly ones where the effects of policy on its object are difficult to discern like science, research and innovation policy, education policy etc. – and organisational management and strategy.

Evaluation in Europe was institutionalised through two primary mechanisms, namely a quasi-professional organisation and dedicated journals. In mid 1990s, the European Evaluation Society aiming to promote the theory, practice and use of high quality evaluation was set up. A number of national Evaluation Societies have also been set up. Moreover in 1995 'Evaluation', a journal dedicated to bringing together work in the field of evaluation and to 'building bridges' between different disciplinary accounts, was started. There is also 'Research Evaluation', a journal focusing more exclusively on the evaluation of research. Both an impressive body of literature and an evaluation community have emerged around these journals.

Evaluation has also become a serious industry. Different pressures for accountability, proving value for money and distributing a finite amount of funding and the accompanying need for selectivity and accountability have precipitate a large number of customer led/initiated evaluations. These include government departments and their funding schemes and mechanisms, European and transnational funding schemes and policies, and lately research funding organisations. These evaluations support an 'evaluation' industry whereby research evaluation has become a service provided by academic institutes (as a lucrative sideline) and research consultancies (as a core business)[1].

Whilst there has been a definite serge in the practice of evaluation (and research evaluation) there has been little attempt to systematise the concepts, methodology and methods of evaluation or to develop systematic sets of evaluation indicators. This is particularly evident where the evaluation of research funding agencies/organisations is concerned (although some evaluations of research councils have been carried out, e.g. the evaluation of the Norwegian Funding Council). In this paper the possibilities for developing indicators to evaluate research-funding organisations are explored. This is done by explicating some assumptions about 'evaluation' and proposing a framework for evaluation, discussing some specific characteristics of research-funding agencies that distinguish these from policies or funding schemes and proposing some avenues for building indicators for the evaluation of research-funding agencies.

The paper begins by exploring the conceptual assumption underpinning the practice of research evaluation. It is argued that evaluation is an inevitable part of social action and that it is as a rule a combination between fact and value. In this aspect it is important to distinguish between social science research that asks and answers questions of the type 'what mechanisms produce particular type of effects' and policy research dealing with considerably more normative questions of the type

[1] Evaluation being at the same time a research field and an industry probably can account for the evaluation community includes academics, researchers, consultants and users, and for many research evaluations being carried out in collaboration with consultants.

‘Is X good/just/proper/desirable’. The per excellence normative character of the question underpinning research (and any other) evaluation is exactly what defines its essence as falling between fact and value. Evaluation is always normative.

Furthermore, the ‘framework for evaluation’ proposed in this paper builds upon the assumption that evaluation inherently deals with three questions, namely ‘What is?’, ‘What ought to be?’ and ‘What is to be done?’ which correspond to the three elements of evaluation proposed here, namely ‘information’, ‘assessment’ and ‘social action’. These elements form the basis for any evaluation and outline the framework for evaluation proposed in the paper.

Where research-funding organisations are concerned, these are discussed as different from funding schemes and instruments in a number of important ways. In brief, research organisations are usually poly-functional, their objectives are dynamic, open to interpretation and nested and their overall aim if to develop capacity rather than to achieve specific and easy to identify output. Hence, evaluation research funding organisations is inherently problematic. To begin with criteria for success are difficult to identify (these are both output and impact). Furthermore success or failure would depend upon both what the organisation does (any schemes, initiatives tools etc.) and what the organisation is (its internal structures and mechanisms) and the interaction between these.

Another layer of issues arises when the understanding of capacity is explored somewhat further. Research capacity can be conceived as being embodied in ‘intermediary public goods’ (Bonaccorsi) or ‘crystallising agents’ (Luukkonen and Nedeva), and people, their competencies and organisations. Capacity, however, is enacted through action and social action occurs in the context of relationships and networks. These processes, I argue, are not very well understood which naturally impedes the development of indicators for the evaluation of research funding organisations.

The paper concludes by looking at the possibilities to develop indicators for the evaluation of research funding organisations. It is argued that three directions are particularly promising, namely indicators of impact, indicators measuring ‘research capacity’ and capturing its evolution and change, and indicators for the value of ‘research capacity’.