STI 2018 Conference Proceedings
Proceedings of the 23rd International Conference on Science and Technology Indicators

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The articles of this collection can be accessed at https://hdl.handle.net/1887/64521
ISBN: 978-90-9031204-0
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Academic behaviour and university policy: evaluation as a tool to change researchers’ behaviour in Italy and UK

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**Introduction**

This study provides a comparison of the post-evaluation effects of national research evaluation frameworks in the UK (REF) and Italy (VQR) at university (macro) and researcher (micro) level. We compare how universities and researchers have responded to their evaluation frameworks, within the constraints of each university system and culture. This paper discusses these effects as part of a wider approach to influencing university and researchers outcomes towards desirable goals.

This study roots in literature surrounding the role of evaluation in our society (Dahler-Larsen 2011 and 2012) and specifically in the academic world (Bonaccorsi 2015), in literature surrounding the effects of evaluations on national and local levels (Nedeva 2013; Derrick 2018). It also considers literatures surrounding techniques influential on the research academic interface (Butler 2003), and on political guidance of behavioural changes (Thaler and Sunstein 2008).

**Methodology**

The analytical framework draws on scholar literature, on government and international reports, and grey literature in order to identify specific trademarks of each university system, national policy constrains and cultural environments. It grounds on a face-to-face comparison of the two HE systems and of the respective evaluation frameworks to identify the criteria against which to assess outputs from interviews. Empirical research data are collected through interviews, both in UK and Italy, with experts involved in the design and implementation of each evaluation exercise.
The interviews have provided a significant number of different and non-homogeneous outputs. The qualitative analysis is carried out in different phases and with mixed methods (Derrick 2008). A number of ‘overarching areas of concern’ were identified; codes have been sorted accordingly and assessed within the context of each national evaluation frameworks.
Hypothesis
We argue that national evaluation exercises are potential tools to influence behaviour at the macro and micro research level and consequently we explore the intertwined implications for the decisional system, the organizational structures, and the individual performance.

Preliminary considerations
As this is still work in progress, for the purpose of the contribution to IST2018 we present a non-exhaustive selection of examples to be pondered as preliminary considerations.

A1) ORGANISATION (macro): From interviews emerges the need to develop skills within the organisations to cope with the new institutional requirements following institutionalisation of evaluation “You have to create an environment from the top down in the institute or the unit that impact is valued. So you need to get sort of mind-set and maybe even teaching about also entrepreneurial skills. I think, the REF process may actually catalyse that and help it...” (UK). It also emerges the opportunity to (re)define the organisations’ role, specifically in relation to the university’s social territorial vocation: “VQR has forced universities to think about their role and their missions and to redesign their strategies” (IT)

B1) POLICY (macro): Anecdotal statements are particularly significant and let emerge that there are concrete attempts to “modify” via research evaluation some ‘typical’ aspects. This is the case of the representative of an Italian ministry who suggested to academics approaching ex-ante evaluation to “write the research proposal ‘like an English’ would do”. The goal seems to be deeper than a linguistic issue; proposing the “English approach” as a model implies the attempt to generate radical changes in the Italian research scenario.

C1) RULES OF ENGAGEMENT (macro): In both countries the strongest criticism is expressed in terms of “how” evaluation is performed, specifically in terms of methodology and definition/interpretation of criteria and the potentially negative effects these could
generate: “If we are driven by a notion of impact, meaning something which makes a headline in the short term, that's going to be a really bad way to go…” (UK). Critics have also been expressed with regard to governance of evaluation results (transparency, publication, communication, use, and misuse) in view of impending risks within each context: “Of course research needs to have impact.” But the way it’s all been constructed with a sort of rewards and punishments scheme, is actually going to squash some of the most creative research we’ve got.”(UK) and also “The evaluation processes are transparent. The way evaluation results becomes funding are not transparent” (IT)

A2) CAREER (micro): In Italy academics’ career is ministry-led and centralised (Abilitazione) while in UK is a university-led path. This difference strongly determines the systemic context against which evaluation effects are assessed. In UK the focus is on individual/organisation (micro/macro) “When you put so much in the performance indicators people start changing their behaviour […] when a university is totally driven by performance indicators, they lose sight of everything.” (UK) while in Italy the paradigm changes as the relationship is individual/policy (micro/mega) “I paid an high price for being a good teacher, engaged in the society, and an entrepreneur to support my PhD students… It has penalised me in the evaluation of my research and thus in my career.” (IT)

B2) It results that effects of evaluation are also different depending on the stage of career as “evaluation results affect those who are building their career not those who have already reached a certain stage” (IT). If this can be true for both countries to certain extent, in Italy the limitation of evaluation effects is accentuated by the characteristic of ministerial accreditation and that acquisition of professorships is equivalent to civil servants status, therefore evaluation does not affect already acquired positions and salaries (which are established by national contracts and are not “merit-related”).

C2) ROLE (micro): Some interviewers suggested that acceptance, understanding and assimilation of evaluation may relate to age, in an inter-generational tension, within the particular geo-cultural context: “In some disciplines professors which carry activities to gather resources are seen as ‘Martians’” (IT), “facility with the media is something I think many academics have come to very slowly and very late […] most of us didn't see it as part of our role. Certainly a new generation of academics will have to be good at it.” (UK)

Table 4. Cross-matrix: example of negative effects (micro/macro)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National evaluation</th>
<th>Relation to funding</th>
<th>Evaluation is used to justify political choices</th>
<th>Unequal treatment of organisations</th>
<th>Unequal treatment of some universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career choices driven by performance</td>
<td>Focus on indicators rather than research interests</td>
<td>Unethical behaviour/gamplay</td>
<td>Perverse way of “shaping” research activities</td>
<td>Death of creativity in research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National evaluation</td>
<td>Increased external (policy/market) control on organisation</td>
<td>Limitation of organisations’ autonomy</td>
<td>External forces drive research</td>
<td>End of autonomy of science</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. Cross-matrix: example of positive effects (micro/macro)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITIVE</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National evaluation</td>
<td>Acquisition of new skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National evaluation</td>
<td>Increased role of ‘merit’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation – • Learning experience • Cultural exercise</td>
<td>Increased acceptance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions
The cross-comparisons allow identifying the post-evaluation effects of different frameworks; to ascertain the specific country/culture related aspects; and to trace the paths of changes happening at each level. Although, changes as effect of the national evaluation frameworks will mostly be visible on a long term “the time to answer it will be in about 10 years' time when we've understood how having impact in the REF has changed the behaviour of the universities in terms of the research they do, because REF will change behaviours, and that could be beneficial, and it could be highly detrimental”. (UK)

Cited references