

Evaluation as a management tool in academia

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Background

For some time, academics have been aware that they, like their colleagues in other parts of the public sector, live in an 'audit society' governed by an 'evaluative state', under the broad umbrella of 'new public management' (Power 1999; Neave 1998; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2011; Ferlie et al. 2008). The frequent use of evaluation as a strategic management tool, in research as well as education, is one aspect of this. Forerunners include the national research evaluation schemes in place in the UK since the mid-1980s (Henkel 2005). Over time, their emphasis has changed somewhat. The current generation of research evaluations reflects the growing importance of external stakeholders and entrepreneurialism in the university sector (Clark 1998). This is manifest in the introduction of societal impact as an important evaluation criterion alongside the traditional scientific criteria (cf. the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK).

The study

Not all evaluations originate from governmental decrees - at least not directly. Universities may also initiate their own evaluations. In Sweden, a number of universities have initiated their own RAEs in recent years, and some of them have also undertaken large-scale quality projects in teaching and learning. Here, one Swedish university is brought forward as a case in point. This university has, in the 2008-2014 period, initiated two assessment exercises in the area of research, one in education and one in administration. Empirical data by way of interviews, policy documents and bibliometrics has been used to analyse the rationale behind the assessment exercises, as well as tentative consequences. In all, 23 semi-structured interviews and one focus group meeting have been conducted in relation to the two RAEs. The study also draws on data, including interviews, from a parallel project on educational quality initiatives (Karlsson et al. 2014).

Findings

To a large extent, university leaders motivated the evaluations by referring to a strategic quality agenda. Both RAEs were introduced as means of identifying strengths and weaknesses in order to pave the way for future investments and priorities, including the formulation of a new strategic plan for the university. Another ambition was to be innovative with regard to evaluation methodology. This was particularly prominent in the second RAE which, like the British REF, gave weight to impact and engagement in society. Similarly, the education assessment exercise was presented as a proactive response to quality-related demands from students and other stakeholders. The final project report stated as much: *"The strategy of [the university] is to be proactive by initiating its own quality assessments rather than waiting for external actors to conduct reviews."* The project was, in part, presented as a trial run before an upcoming, national evaluation scheduled to take place in the following year.

The data also indicates that the evaluation projects were used to further internal change agendas. In the area of research, the university leadership sought to promote an interest in the impact-oriented approach as well as an increased use of publication channels that would be favourable for the university's ranking position. In the area of education, the evaluation was seen as lever in the attempt to upgrade the status of teaching and learning (Higher Education Academy 2009).

Because the evaluations are relatively recent - the administrative one taking place in 2014 - it is too early to assess whether these management ambitions have been met. Nonetheless, some early consequences are discernible from the data, particularly so in relation to the two RAEs (Karlsson & Geschwind 2013). Generally speaking, research groups that excelled in the first evaluation continued to do so in the second evaluation, albeit with less enthusiasm for the evaluation format. Many felt that the paperwork required was unreasonable (cf. Henkel 2005). Instead, the most tangible consequences were seen in relation to research groups that had not performed well in the first exercise. For them, the second evaluation presented a new opportunity, and some were able to improve their results considerably. In the period, the university publication database coverage improved: more research publications were formally registered. Bibliometric data does not, however, indicate that the RAEs have led to radically increased output or changes in publication patterns. At the same time, interview data suggests that many research groups experience, and actively discuss, the mounting pressure to publish in highly cited international journals. Generally, the increased emphasis on impact and engagement in society was uncontroversial, often well received.

Discussion

Evaluations may be justified in a number of ways. In this case, university leaders put forward a rationale that primarily relates to external demands. Through the evaluation projects, the university signalled its responsiveness to stakeholders, be they students, research funding bodies or government. The evaluations were framed by the university's quest for international recognition and visibility and its aspiration to be a "world class university" (Salmi 2009). Thus, they can be interpreted as strategic initiatives aimed at protecting the legitimacy of the university. Such initiatives are necessary as universities become more open and resource dependent, and competition increases (Deephouse & Suchman 2008, Pfeffer & Salancik 1978).

The evaluations were also used to further internal change agendas. It remains to be seen whether these aspirations will be successful or not. On the face of it, the short-term impact appears small, not least relative to the high-pitched ambitions: changing the publication culture, upgrading the status of teaching and learning etc. Having said that, cultural change does not occur over night, let alone in academia, but there is mounting evidence that organisations can, and do, change in response to policy initiatives (Sahlin & Wedlin 2008). Evaluations are a commanding concept (Dahler-Larsen 2012) and the repeated use of this management tool may yet prove to have far-reaching effects on the university.

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