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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.

Table 1. Comparison of HE Systems (UK and Italy)

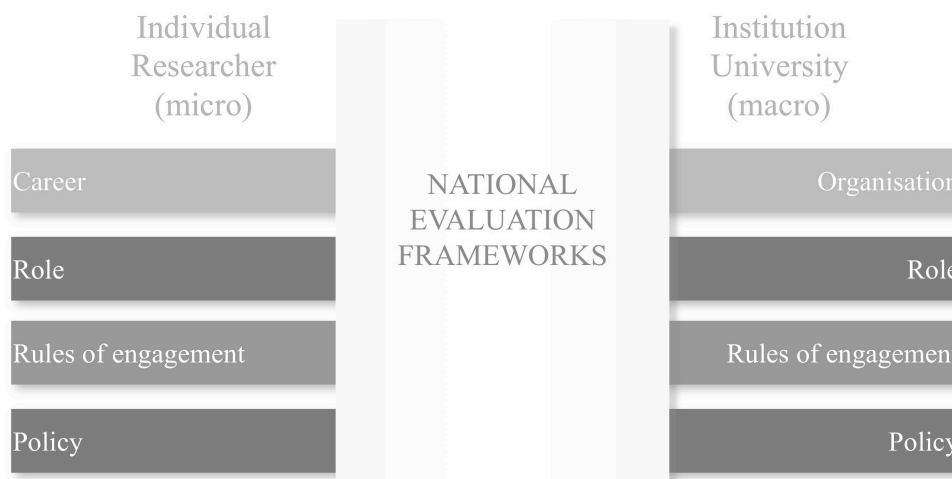
comparison criteria	UK	IT
<b>Status of universities</b>	Legally independent corporate institutions	Public institutions depending from Ministry (67) - Private (28 different nature) + Public research institutions (incl. hospitals)
<b>Level of autonomy</b>	High	Partial
<b>Level of competitiveness</b>	High	Low (increasing)
<b>Level of openness</b>	International vocation	Strongly national (1.8 % foreign staff)
<b>Funding</b>	Highly competitive	Increasingly competitive
<b>Type Sources Accountability</b>	Performance based Private (50%) External pressure	Partially performance based Government grant (75%) State (via legislation)
<b>Academic actors</b>		
<b>Status of Professors</b>	Competitive job market: permanent & temporary positions	Civil servant (after acquisition of "abilitazione")
<b>Status of Researchers</b>	Competitive job market for all type of positions	Both permanent and temporary positions depending on time/law
<b>Selection/Career</b>	Application/selection run by universities	Abilitazione – National competition
<b>Salaries</b>	Variable by position Negotiated within market	Fixed by national legislation Salaries not related to 'merit'
<b>Dissemination of research results</b>	International	Increasingly international
<b>Open access</b>	High	'this unknown'

Table 2. Comparison of Evaluation Frameworks (UK and Italy)

comparison criteria	UK	IT
<b>Evaluation system</b>	REF (RAE in the past)	VQR (VTR in the past)
<b>Cycle</b>	7 Years	4 Years
<b>Scope</b>	Sample of products for a sample of academic population	Sample of products over totality of academic population
<b>Participation</b>	possibility to drop out	all staff (from Prof to PhD)
<b>Level of autonomy of institutions</b>	High	Compulsory (Universities, Research Centres, Med schools)
<b>Level of autonomy of researchers</b>	Moderate (highly dictated by REF process)	Low (drop-out has consequences at University level)
<b>ORCID</b>	possibly next REF	mandatory prerequisite VQR 2011-2014
<b>Methodology</b>		
<b>use of bibliometrics</b>	additional data to inform judgement	NSE and economics [mechanic calculation informs evaluators]
<b>use of peer review</b>	yes	SSH
<b>use of impact factor</b>	no	NSE and economics [mechanic calculation informs evaluator]
<b>Acceptability</b>	High	High in principle BOYCOTT
<b>Intended use of results</b>	Organisation: Funding to Universities Individual: Career	Organisation: Funding to Universities + Funding to depts/PhD schools Individual: Career

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.

Table 3. Overarching areas of concern / Categories of interviews' outputs



### 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 a 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)

NEGATIVE				Perceived Risks
National evaluation	Relation to funding	Evaluation = tool to distribute resources	Evaluation masks/justifies political choices	Unequal treatments of organisations (penalisation of some universities)
Career choices driven by performance	Focus on indicators rather than research interests	Unethical behaviour / gameplay	Perverse way of “shaping” research activities	Death of creativity in research
National evaluation	Increased external (policy/market) control on organisation	Limitation of organisations' autonomy	External forces drive research	End of autonomy of science

Table 5. Cross-matrix: example of positive effects (micro/macro)

POSITIVE			Opportunities	
National evaluation	Acquisition of new skills	Structural changes in organisations (academics and non-academic)	Rethinking ROLES	Disruption of traditional academic mechanisms
National evaluation	Increased role of 'merit'	Changing hiring system	Increased mobility	Increase openness & internationalisation
Evaluation = • Learning experience • Cultural exercise	Increased acceptance Increased awareness	Rethinking strategies	Changing traditional missions + New mission	Innovation in the relationship of academia with society at large

## 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)

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