University Under Pressure: How Academic Practices and Identities Change in the Age of Evaluation

Orazio Giancola*

Author information

*   Department of Social and Economic Sciences, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.
      Email: orazio.giancola@uniroma1.it

University Under Pressure: How Academic Practices and Identities Change in the Age of Evaluation

Orazio Giancola

[Review of the book: Conseguenze della valutazione. Idee e pratiche dei docenti universitari nelle scienze sociali, edited by Renato Fontana and Elena Valentini, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2020. ISBN: 9788835106913]

The reforms of the Italian university system since around 2000 have brought about enormous changes in various areas of academic life. The introduction of individual and aggregate evaluation mechanisms such as the so-called "Abilitazione Scientifica Nazionale" (National Scientific Qualification), the cyclical evaluation of the "quality of research" ("VQR"), as the various accreditation procedures, periodic self-evaluation of degree courses (the "AVA" system) have affected individual practices, organizational structures, and the very way in which knowledge is produced and circulated.

In the book edited by Renato Fontana and Elena Valentini, these changes are investigated with methodological accuracy and illustrated with interpretative clarity. The numerous contributions contained in the book produce a polyphony rich in nuances but with a solid underlying argument: that the policies implemented have induced a profound socio-anthropological mutation in the ways of thinking and doing scientific research, in disseminating it (in accordance with what is provided by the so called "Third Mission") but also in the academic ethos.

In the first part of the book, a real reconstruction is made of the complex and muddled normative-institutional framework of university evaluation (a meritorious work because it shows the uncertainties of the process of the

progressive affirmation of evaluation in itself and of the multiple normative and procedural devices developed over time). Following this reconstruction, all the ambiguities linked to the concept of "scientific product", treated as a sort of output of a linear production process, clearly emerge. On the contrary, as the sociology of science well explains, research activity and scientific production is discontinuous, subject to phases of acceleration and phases of (necessary) stasis. The analysis also clearly shows how evaluation practices (the VQR above all) do not take into account the combination produced by the overload of administrative and managerial micro-tasks that academics have to manage on a daily basis in the day-to-day of academic work.

In an interesting chapter written by Davide Borrelli, Ian McNay and Benedicte Vidaillet[1], the authors show how the cases of RAE (The Research Assessment Exercise) and REF (Research Excellence Framework) (REF) in the UK have induced deep distortions in academic practice, career management policies, and funding of research structures. The same is evident in the French case, where the policies for "excellence" and "merit" have supercharged competition producing a "normalization" and a generalized impoverishment of research (especially in the humanities and social sciences; see p.90). The process of progressive affirmation of research and university evaluation in Italy more generally is therefore part of an international mainstream, in which the dominance of rankings (and of classification practices that sometimes fall into the excesses of "naming & shaming") is evident and strong.

In this regard, the book contains interesting analyses of the political assumptions, the numerous epistemological and procedural errors, and the many 'grey' and arbitrary spaces within which those implementing the evaluation find themselves operating. In this sense, the examination of the VQR (in its various editions) is of great interest: "originality", "methodological rigor" and "impact" are assessment criteria that are included in the regulations but lack operational definition and are therefore subject to variable *stipulative* definitions. In this case, then, there is also the paradox that the "products" evaluated are not anonymized, thus violating the fundamental principle of evaluation, i.e. double-blind peer review, in favor of a more economical principle of "open peer review", with all the distortions that this entails.

In this sense, Davide Borrelli (chap. 8) shows all the ambiguities of the term "internationalization", demonstrating how this criterion is vitiated by

---

[1] Benedicte Vidaillet is author of a remarkable critical book, entitled "*Evaluez-moi! Evaluation au travail: les ressorts d'une fascination*" (2013) in which it shows how meritocracy intercepts our need for recognition, thus configuring itself as a self-justifying criterion that cancels out all the grey areas and problems connected to meritocratic ideology itself. Here it is interesting to note how Vidaillet's theses strongly permeate many passages in the book edited by Fontana and Valentini.

the fact that the aforementioned "internationalization", from being a means of disseminating knowledge, becomes an end in itself, with respect to the evaluation parameters adopted from time to time. Obviously, the author recognizes the importance of the circulation of scientific production and the cruciality of comparison with a wider community. At the same time, he shows (with interesting interview excerpts and documentary analysis) how relevance in the national community of appearance cannot be debased on the altar of internationalization *per se* or on the recourse to the "neo-koiné" of Anglo-Saxon matrix (p.187).

A large space is dedicated to the analysis of the scientific production of the disciplinary area 14 (chap. 4), which involved three universities: University of Genoa, "Sapienza" University of Rome, and University of Salerno. This survey, carried out through the IRIS catalogue, has allowed us to identify some basic information on the scientific production of professors, taking into account their role, scientific sector, department and faculty.

The descriptive analysis revealed that the majority of publications are contributions in volumes (40.9%) and contributions in journals (31.2%), followed by lower percentages of monographs, conference proceedings and editorships. In addition, we observe an increase in the number of dual-signature products from 8% in the pre-2000s period to 24% in the 2016-2019 period. This shows that the evaluation dynamics have brought about some changes. It is also interesting to note that the increase in scientific production has mainly involved fixed term researchers (RTD A and B), underlining the fact that these new academic figures are already socialized to the logic of maximizing productivity as required by the regulations (similar to what has been shown in Colarusso, Giancola, 2020).

A further element that confirms the effects of evaluation on scientific production is the increase of products in conjunction with the ASN (2012 and 2016) and VQR (2004-2010: 2011-2014; 2015-2019) calls. This finding is indirect evidence of how evaluation tools, individual and aggregated, function as devices for regulating conduct (Grimaldi, 2019) often producing attitudes of adaptation and, sometimes, resistance (Gambardella & Lumino 2020).

The exploratory analysis carried out on the data of the scientific production was accompanied by a rich and interesting qualitative research based on biographical interviews with privileged witnesses (chapters 5, 6, 7) to investigate their opinion on evaluation (and all that characterizes it), their experience and their point of view within the academy. The interviews confirm that the introduction of assessment mechanisms has had a decisive impact on the academic career of individuals, from training to career progression, but also on the dynamics of relationships (especially between colleagues). Moreover, the interviewees agree on the profound change in the activity of the teacher with the arrival of evaluation, which has affected the life of *homo*

academicus in all its aspects (Bourdieu, 1984). From the relationship with the teacher, to the relationships with colleagues and the institution, up to the meaning to be attributed to one's own work, to the relationship with science and with the production of knowledge, the changes recorded seem to be of considerable entity. The interviews show precisely the passage from a "traditional" to a "bureaucratic" organizational model, highlighting above all the relational aspect and the different ways of "personalizing the relationship" (p. 149).

A limitation, however, to be recognized in the volume commented on here is that in the face of an ample *pars destruens*, there are no clear proposals for a possible alternative evaluation, with the risk of relapsing into the self-referentiality that has characterized the academic world for years (Moscati *et al.* 2010), with discouraging results both those that emerged in conjunction with the pervasiveness of current evaluation policies. The risk of such an approach is a total rejection of evaluation, which, instead, if conducted in a more transparent and pluralistic manner, can produce positive results both for academics and for the university and research in general.

As Nicoletta Stame (2001) points out, an evaluation that is useful for the improvement of practices, equity, and the valorization of differences (in this case, disciplinary and sub-disciplinary), while not excluding a quantitative dimension (as in the model that the author defines as a "positivist-experimental" approach, in which evaluation is an analysis and verification of the achievement of objectives established a priori), must be a learning process aimed at understanding, rather than "measuring", what is being evaluated (Stame, 2006). This is a hermeneutic evaluation that enhances the qualitative dimension, the pluralism of values of the different subjectivities involved in the evaluation process: evaluation becomes, therefore, a process of negotiation, of phenomenological understanding.

In this sense, even a scholar such as Andrea Bonaccorsi who is very favorable (by epistemological position and professional experience) to evaluation affirms that it is desirable (especially in the humanities and social sciences) not to oppose the presence of pluralism and the possibility of identifying common criteria on the quality of research (Bonaccorsi, 2015, p. 144-145).

If one merit of the volume presented here is therefore that of proposing empirical evidence on the limits of the current evaluation system, on the other hand, it is necessary to reflect more on a "sustainable" evaluation that goes beyond systems of "reward quotas" or positioning in rankings, but which also takes subjectivity into account, of the richness produced by the co-presence of theoretical and empirical approaches that do not necessarily have to align themselves with the mainstream that standard criteria produce and induce to follow.

Starting from this point, there is therefore much to reflect in order to realize an evaluation system that is more democratic, fair, open and participated, for a freer research fully oriented to the progress of the disciplines but also of the community in its entirety.

References

Bonaccorsi, A. (2015). La valutazione possibile. Teoria e pratica nel mondo della ricerca. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). Homo Academicus. Paris: Éditions de Minuit. Trad.it. Homo Academicus. Bari: Dedalo, 2013.

Colarusso, S., & Giancola, O. (2020). Università e nuove forme di valutazione. Strategie individuali, produzione scientifica, effetti istituzionali. Roma: Sapienza Università editrice.

Lumino, R., & Gambardella, D. (2020). Re-framing accountability and learning through evaluation: Insights from the Italian higher education evaluation system. *Evaluation*, 26(2), 147-165.

Grimaldi, E. (2019). An archaeology of educational evaluation: Epistemological spaces and political paradoxes. London: Routledge.

Moscati, R., Regini, M., & Rostan, M. (2010). Torri d'avorio in frantumi?: dove vanno le università europee. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Stame, N. (2001). Tre approcci principali al tema della valutazione: distinguere e combinare. In M. Palumbo, Il processo di valutazione. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

Stame, N. (2006). Valutazione come apprendimento. *Rassegna Italiana di Valutazione*, 34, 13-20.

Vidaillet, B. (2013). Évaluez-moi! Évaluation au travail: les resorts d'une fascination. Paris: Le Seuil. Trad.it. (a cura di), D. Borrelli, M. Gavrila, A. Pelliccia, Valutatemi! Il fascino indiscreto della meritocrazia, Aprilia: Novalogos, 2018.