DRIVERS JOURNAL CLUB

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"Understanding the Social and Political Dimensions of Research(er) Assessment: Evaluative Flexibility and Hidden Criteria in Promotion Processes at Research Institutes."

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1. Preliminaries

- **Evaluation** refers to the process of judging the value of something, but there is actually no definitive consensus on a definition (Hornbostel 2016; Wanzer 2021).
- In an ideal evaluation (Stockmann 2004, 2; Laursen, Motzer, and Anderson 2022, 328),
  - empirical methods are used to collect information about the **evaluand**—the entity being evaluated,
  - systematic procedures are applied to assess it using transparent **criteria** and sound **evaluative reasoning**,
  - and the resulting **evaluative judgment** is produced and documented in a way that allows intersubjective verification.
- Evaluation **criteria** are the features of the evaluand that help determine its value within a specific evaluation context.
  - Evaluation criteria are related to—but distinct from—indicators.

1. Preliminaries

- There are two main **approaches to research evaluation**: **peer review** and metric-based, **quantitative assessment**. In the latter, indicators play a central role.
- In general, an **indicator** is a mathematical expression that is applied to numerical data and results in a numerical value that shows the direction or level of performance of an entity. (Dorsch and Haustein 2023, 274)
- The applicability of an indicator depends on:
  - ***Validity*** – Does it measure what it is supposed to measure?
  - ***Reliability*** – Are results consistent?
  - ***Fairness*** – Is it free from bias?
  - ***Usefulness*** – Does it serve the intended purpose?
- Indicators are not necessarily exact measuring instruments but instead reveal patterns or trends that inform expert judgment.

2. Theoretical background of the paper

- **Research evaluation as a social process**
  - Despite appearances of objectivity, research evaluation is a fundamentally social process, shaped by variable practices, structures, and situations.
- **Risk of bias in research evaluation**
  - Social, political, and cognitive biases and preferences of evaluators can pose risks for individual and collective evaluative judgment and decision-making.
  - Quantitative indicators are also influenced by biases, either inherent in the respective metrics themselves or introduced by the evaluators using them.
- **Research assessment reform**
  - A broader range of criteria is needed to incentivize research practices.
  - Peer review and qualitative instruments expand achievement, diversity, and holistic assessments.

2. Theoretical background of the paper

- **Transparent assessment criteria**
  - New Public Management frames transparency of decision-making, target-setting and evaluation as necessary conditions for accountability.
  - As criteria are selective and those interpreting them situated, complete transparency is impossible—there is no fully transparent evaluation perspective.
  - Criteria are often viewed as unclear and applied flexibly by assessors.
- **Evaluative flexibility and hidden criteria**
  - Evaluative flexibility in research assessment—despite formalized procedures—often allows social and political factors to influence outcomes.
  - Few empirical studies have examined the broader political and social factors influencing research assessment in review, promotion, and tenure.

3. Methods of the paper

- **Research questions**:
  - "What are researchers' general perceptions towards **research assessment criteria used in review, promotion and tenure processes at institutions**?" (3)
  - "What **other factors** (e.g. social, political, performance-based) **not officially listed as criteria**, do participants identify as nonetheless important in assessment processes" (3)
- **Survey** targeting active researchers from diverse academic disciplines globally
- Two open-ended questions on participants' perceptions of research assessment criteria in promotion processes and the influence of unofficial factors
- The survey (29 June–30 July 2021) reached 11,463 researchers (from 16,500 emails), yielding 198 valid responses (2.81%), with **121 (1.05%) answering the free-text questions** that form the focus of this paper.
- **Data analysis**: open coding approach based on Grounded Theory

4. Results of the paper

- **Demographics** based on 121 respondents in total:
  - Respondents were primarily from Europe and North America, though participation extended across 34 countries in total.
  - 83 respondents identified as male, 38 as female, and none as non-binary or other.
  - 48 were **professors**, 44 (36.36%) **senior lecturers/associate professors**, 19 (15.70%) **lecturers/assistant professors**, 5 (4.13%) postdocs, 3 (2.48%) doctoral students, and 2 (1.65%) identified as 'other.'
  - Regarding disciplinary coverage, respondents were most commonly from the **natural sciences, engineering, or medicine**.

4. Results of the paper

- **Overall attitudes to research assessment criteria**:
  - **Mixed sentiments**: 31 positive vs. 35 negative responses; negative views often strongly worded.
  - **Quantitative metrics**: 27 respondents mentioned the use of quantitative indicators as factors for their disappointment with research assessment.
  - **Evaluative flexibility**: A substantial share of respondents perceived a disconnect at their institution between the officially-stated policies and the ways in which they were applied in practice.
  - **Clarity of criteria**: Many respondents found assessment criteria unclear, inconsistently communicated, or even nonexistent—raising concerns about transparency, fairness, and accessibility.
  - Some respondents criticized the weight given to journal prestige over research quality, as well as a lack of emphasis on OS and societal impact.

4. Results of the paper

- **Perceptions of hidden factors in research (er) assessment**:
  - 68 respondents provided substantive answers about unofficial promotion factors, while 13 others gave non-responses such as “N/A” or referred to previous comments.
  - 27 respondents highlighted **political and social factors**, such as personal relationships, internal politics, loyalty to management, and even regional or political affiliations.
  - **Alignment with research trends** and methods was seen by 7 respondents as crucial for promotion, with those outside the mainstream often at a disadvantage.
  - Seven respondents highlighted **diversity and discrimination** as factors in promotion, pointing to structural gender bias and lack of opportunity for underrepresented groups, while a few raised concerns about reverse discrimination.

5. Discussion

- **Limitations of the study**
  - **Self-selection bias**: Responses to the free-text questions were optional, possibly attracting more participants with strong opinions on research assessment practices.
  - **Lack of follow-up**: Free-text format limited opportunities to clarify or elaborate, potentially missing nuance or context in short responses.
  - **Limited and uneven sample:** The study had a small, low-response sample that overrepresented male, senior STEM researchers from Europe and the USA, limiting the generalizability of findings.
  - **Perspective gap**: Only the views of those being assessed were considered; assessors' perspectives, especially important in qualitative assessment systems, were not included.

5. Discussion

- **Critique of quantification**: Concerns about overemphasis on publication counts and funding overshadowing quality and broader impact.
- **Shifts toward reform**: Some noted recent improvements, crediting initiatives like DORA and CoARA promoting more holistic assessments.
- **Hidden criteria**: Perceptions of unspoken factors (e.g., social networks, demographics) influencing outcomes—raising issues of cronyism and bias.
- Tension between **rigid metrics and vague criteria**; both can enable bias if not carefully managed.
  - **Greater flexibility can be valuable**, even necessary, to identify legitimate and crucial elements that are missed by narrow metrics.
  - **Greater flexibility can increase the risk of bias and poor decisions**, just as relying too much on quantitative indicators may lead to simplistic evaluations that overlook the complexity of research and its impacts.

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