Chapter 16 – The evaluative state, the evaluative society – and beyond

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Introduction

Late in the 1980s, Guy Neave (1988), a long-time observer of higher education, reflected upon how various Western European countries had changed their mode of governance – arguing that we could see the emergence of an 'evaluative state' in a number of countries in this region. The starting point of this reflection was that the relationship between higher education and the state was in a state of transition, with major implications both for the steering role and capacity of the state and for the framing of autonomy in higher education. While Neave's initial focus was on developments in Western Europe, it is worth noting that similar `winds of change` were blowing at the same time in in a number of countries located in other continents, most prominently throughout the Anglosphere, and soon spread to many other parts of the world (see Neave & van Vught, 1994).

In many ways, the key changes observed at this time spurred a continuous reform effort in higher education – and other state sectors – which is currently very much alive and kicking (Braun, 2008; Capano, 2011; Howlett, 2014; Paradeise et al., 2009; van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). As part of these reform efforts higher education institutions in many countries have been granted more formal autonomy while at the same time being exposed to new demands related to their performance – restricting what some have labelled their `living autonomy' (Gornitzka, Maassen & de Boer, 2017) or 'autonomy in practice' (Enders, de Boer & Weyer, 2013). The questions of how higher education institutions have handled this autonomy, how they have exploited and been restricted by the evolving contractual relationships with the state stressing autonomy and organisational performance, and how they have changed as organisations as a consequence, have received considerable attention over the years (Bleiklie, Enders & Lepori, 2017; Christensen, 2011; Enders, de Boer & Weyer, 2013). Similarly, there is a considerable body of literature devoted to examining changes to the relationship between higher education and the state and the resulting governance implications (Capano, 2011; Maassen & Stensaker, 2011; Gornitzka, Maassen & de Boer, 2017). It is against this backdrop of this continuing interest in questions concerning the evolving relationship between state and higher education more broadly and university autonomy more specifically that a re-evaluation of the conception of the 'evaluative state' is called for (see Neave, 2012).

The current chapter is an attempt to do precisely that – looking back at the origins of the developments that led Guy Neave to coin the term in the late 1980s while also considering changes to the relationship between the state and higher education over the following three

decades. Our discussion is organised in four sections. First, we go back to the original concept and identify the drivers and key characteristics related to the emergence of the 'evaluative state'. Second, we provide an overview of the evaluative mechanisms and developments that have taken place over the following three decades or so. Third, we argue that the original conception of the 'evaluative state' has become too confined considering both the salience of transnational modes and vehicles of evaluation and of what some have labelled the emergence of an 'evaluative society'. We end by discussing potential implications of current trends in public policy and governance that may spur further developments in the state – higher education relationship in the years to come.

The 'evaluative state' – drivers and key characteristics

When Guy Neave (1988) coined the term the 'evaluative state' he wanted to underline a dramatic governance shift taking place in higher education during the 1980s in some European countries. His main argument was that the reform attempts associated with the 'evaluative state' fundamentally changed the historic modes of evaluation enforcing a new instrumentality in the sector driving higher education into becoming a service provider *for* the state instead of an institution offering services *to* the state. Neave (1988) argued consistently against this new, more instrumental mode of governance as being inappropriate to higher education.

The shifts portrayed by Neave were at the same time also echoed from other observers – not only in higher education research – pointing out the emergence of a new `managerialism` (Braun & Merrien, 1999; Shepherd, 2018) or indications of 'new public management' (NPM) (Henkel, 1991; Pollitt, 1993) in public governance in a number of countries around the world. Neave himself later considered the concepts of the evaluative state and NPM to be compatible to some extent, but ultimately sees the evaluative state as the more foundational and normative conception and NPM as more narrowly concerned with operational means (Neave, 2012, p. 22). Conversely, others appear to regard NPM as encapsulating a normative conception of public policy reform that has provided "the ideological foundation of the evaluative state" within higher education systems in the first place (Bleiklie, 1998, p. 299).

Regardless of whether the evaluative state or NPM are treated as the more foundational and normative concept, they both essentially share a concern with a public governance shift from emphasising processes of planning (*a priori*) to emphasising performance and results (*a posteriori*). In higher education policy, this shift may involve, for example, a strengthening of performance-based funding mechanisms that allocate funding to universities based upon results achieved, usually through ex post evaluations of specific outputs such as number of publications (see Hicks, 2012).

The rise of the evaluative state and the public governance shift toward results (and their evaluation) has had a range of lasting implications for the relationship between the state and higher education institutions (van Vught, 1989; Dill, 1998):

- The state separated the role of being an owner of higher education institutions from the role of being a buyer of services from the same institutions
- The state established new intermediate agencies to manage the different roles – especially with respect to performance evaluation
- The state (or the new intermediate agencies) formally defined performance outputs and created indicators for their accomplishments
- The state (or the new intermediate agencies) also formulated wider societal expectations for higher education institutions asking them to be accountable for efficient (and relevant) use of their resources in teaching and research
- The state also introduced – in addition to traditional targets with respect to effectiveness and efficiency – quality as the dominant measure for which higher education were to be accountable.

Ten years after first coining the concept, Neave (1998, p. 266) basically re-enforced his arguments from a decade earlier – underlying how the new mode of governance have created a 'frenzy of technicité' and instrumentalism to the sector focusing on short-term gains instead of the long-term benefits of higher education. He furthermore identified key drivers behind the 'evaluative state': 1) The ambition to find effective ways of controlling higher education administratively; 2) the goal to make the control of higher education institutions more efficient, and 3) the ambition to find ways to cut the implementation lag in the sector (Neave, 1998, p. 273). Finally, Neave underlined that the 'evaluative state' not necessarily implied lighter steering from the state and its agencies, and a less cumbersome mode of governance as a result (Neave, 1998, p. 282).

These concerns were basically echoed but extended by Dill (1998) when he analysed the various assumptions behind the 'evaluative state' pointing out that this governance mode might have some in-built challenges. In particular, Dill (1998, p. 363) questioned whether the state and its agencies always would act in the interest of the public (e.g., who should define quality?), whether indicators and performance targets were valid representations of the political will (e.g., how to measure quality?), and whether the overall costs associated with extensive performance and quality measurements would be too high (e.g., if quality is multifaceted, should we not measure all possible dimensions?). As alternatives to the 'evaluative state', Dill discussed the relevance of various forms of market approaches and not least how the academic profession could play a role in public governance arrangements. In conclusion, he argued that the governance choice was not about advocating for one particular governance mode but finding a balance between three imperfect arrangements that might

function differently under different conditions (Dill, 1998, p. 370-371; see also Amaral & Magalhães, 2001).

In a more recent contribution focusing on changes in the French, Dutch and British higher education systems, Neave (2012) has drawn further attention to the interrelationship between the evaluative state and the shift toward institutional autonomy in higher education governance. In particular, Neave identifies three key developments to this shift which have had distinct implications for the internal functioning of higher education institutions: 1) The relocation of the locus of autonomy from the individual (academic staff) to the institution; 2) within the university, the progressive substitution of managerial for traditional and more esoteric academic values, and which is reflected in a strengthening of the power of the senior executive; and 3) a reinforcement of bureaucratic regulation and state steering control under the disguise of institutional autonomy and the associated accountability arrangements (see on this point also Capano, 2011; Christensen, 2011).

Variations and developments in evaluation of quality in higher education since the 1990s

Looking back at how the 'evaluative state' has evolved since the late 1990s, it is possible to identify several developments that reflected the initial characteristics – and worries – related to this changed governance mode, especially related to the increased role of intermediate (quality assurance) agencies in higher education and the 'inflation' related to the various methods applied in evaluation of quality in universities' core activities. Some developments, not least related to how evaluations also became an international and global phenomenon, are harder to trace back to the original concept. In this section, we summarise the developments in the latter thirty years under three headings – acknowledging that this emphasis on major developments may overshadow the many national variations that exist in different countries in the same period.

The evaluative agencies

One key trend, with less national variation, is the substantial increase in intermediate agencies related to evaluation of quality in countries around the world. As a recent review underlines, most countries in the world currently have at least one quality assurance agency operating within national borders (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020). The process of agentification to be observed in the domain of quality assurance is commonly understood to be a key element of governments' endeavouring to decentralise processes of steering in order to create ostensibly more responsive, flexible and domain-specific forms of public governance (see Pollitt, 2005). In the specific policy domain of higher education, such agencies are meant to effectively mediate between government (as the policy 'principal') and the various higher education organisations – hence their labelling as 'intermediary' bodies (see de Boer, 1992).

Having an agency does not imply, however, that they have similar responsibilities or roles in the higher education system in which they operate. For example, intermediary agencies can have varying policy functions ranging from direct involvement in higher education policy making, to providing advice that influences the development of policy, to merely implementing governmental policy (Hopbach & Fliermann, 2020). The degree to which agencies can creatively shape higher education policy processes is mainly dependent upon what has been referred to as 'policy autonomy' (Verhoest et al., 2004). Such autonomy refers to the discretion agencies have over the choice of specific policy instruments, goals and objectives, e.g., for quality assurance purposes, formally and practically (Capano and Turri, 2017, p. 3).

A range of recent scholarship has shown that the specific roles and responsibilities of agencies charged with quality assurance also reflect national governance traditions and the broader political-administrative systems of which they are part of (Friedrich, 2021; Jungblut & Woelert, 2018). The same can be said about agencies' organisational status – agencies can be quite tightly integrated into the state bureaucracy while others may be private enterprises or have other ownership structures which enable their operation more independently based on regulatory protections in place (Dill & Beerkens, 2010). In the U.S., for example, which has one of the most established systems of external quality assurance for higher education in the world, evaluative agencies have been operating very independent of federal authorities - more tightly interwoven with the academic profession (Eaton, 2018).

In Europe, several studies indicate that national quality assurance agencies are in a constant flux of re-organisation and directed towards the uptake of new tasks and roles domestically, not least reflecting the ambitions of new governments trying to make an impact on higher education (Westerheijden et al., 2014, Hopbach & Fliermann, 2020). While agentification in Europe in many other sectors have involved attempts to create supra-national agencies and structures (Levi-Faur, 2011), the developments in higher education do not hint at a particularly strong European regulatory space in higher education – as domestic adaptations and agendas still dominate agency operations (Manatos & Huisman, 2020).

Overall, a range of studies conducted over the years – both in Europe but also elsewhere – suggest that the governmental interest for control over these agencies tend to overshadow their potential role as an independent quality enhancer in the sector, and that higher education institutions and those working there – in line with the original assumptions by Guy Neave – are heavily exposed to the 'red tape' caused by this mode of operation (Stensaker, 2018; Bouwens et al., 2019). Of course, the many changes observed with respect to these agencies concerning their mandates, mode of operation, methods and scope may also be related to the constant struggle for 'fine-tuning' their role in national governance arrangements (Rosa & Amaral, 2014; Westerheijden et al., 2014; Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020). Nevertheless, when reflecting on the relationship between the state and its agencies

one could argue that it is still the state that has the upper hand (see also Capano, 2011), and that the power and influence of the agencies in the domestic governance arrangements are ultimately limited.

The 'evaluative state' beyond borders

One development which was not foreseen by Guy Neave back in 1988 was how the 'evaluative state' quite rapidly started to operate beyond national borders. This happened initially in two ways; either as states voluntarily agreed to establish bi-lateral agreements across borders, or as new regulations were developed internationally which the states later adopted (Gornitzka & Stensaker, 2014). In Europe, this trend was initiated by the Bologna process in early 2000s, and the establishment of supranational regulation in quality assurance; the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ENQA).

From a regulatory point of view, the interesting aspect of this development is that the new supranational regulations were heavily influenced by the new European interest organisation (ENQA) being the driving force behind the development of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) in the area of quality assurance. Gornitzka & Stensaker (2014) have argued that this development – in principle – could be interpreted as a weakening of state power to a supranational governance level and that the traditional understanding of state power was challenged in what could be labelled as an emerging network governance mode (Torfing, 2012). In the latter mode a range of interdependent actors contribute to and shape public governance arrangements. As such, one could argue that the traditional role of the state as a key player in setting up international governance arrangements has been challenged over the years.

The expansion of regulation in the area of quality assurance is currently a global phenomenon with new international meta-organisations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008) emerging responsible for initiating and upholding negotiated higher education 'quality standards' in various regions around the world – including Europe, South America, North America, the Arab world, and South-East Asia (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). While national and international regulatory frameworks sometimes are aligned, it is not difficult to find examples of regulatory frameworks that create tensions and conflict for operating agencies – and for national authorities (Karakhanyan & Stensaker, 2020). Examples include international regulatory frameworks opening up for agencies to operate across national borders, thus putting pressure those countries wanting to maintain national control over the quality assurance operators within their borders. The state is in this way challenged as the only legitimate provider of evaluative designs and standards.

A related trend that also challenges the state as the solely normative producer of evaluative designs and standards is the rise of transnational evaluation devices, the most prominent example of which are global university rankings such as the Academic Ranking of World

Universities (AWRU), the Times Higher Education Rankings (THE), or the QS World university rankings, to only mention the most prominent examples. In many instances, such rankings have become an explicit reference point for national science policy actors and their initiatives (see Weingart, 2005). This is particular so where such rankings are used as a vehicle for making visible and comparing the competitiveness of national higher education systems and their institutions (see Brankovic, Werron & Ringel, 2015). There are at least two significant implications arising from this development. First, through accepting global rankings as legitimatise means for evaluating and comparing higher education systems and institutions, the state cedes much of its control over the construction of indicators used for evaluative purposes. Second and following from the former, a focus on such rankings implies a shift toward abstract 'excellence' imperatives which may disincentivise locally engaged and relevant forms of activities within the national higher education system. Thus, while excellence indeed may be a key dimension also important for national governments, issues related to the diversity of the whole higher education system, relevance and effectiveness may suffer as consequence.

The inflation of evaluations methods and its implications

When the 'evaluative state' was born, it came equipped with a wide array of instruments, indicators and methods to be used in the evaluations conducted (Cave et al., 1995). Examples includes audits, assessments, accreditations, licencing, performance management systems, national databases, report cards, etc. (Dill & Beerkens, 2010; Hazelkorn, 2018).

While accreditation over time took over as the dominating methods of evaluation, other methods and instruments did not disappear (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). On the contrary, as the 'evaluative state' continued to expand it was also possible to identify an interest in experimenting with new approaches to enhance relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of the evaluative operations (Rosa & Amaral, 2014). The key driver behind this development was – and still is – questions about whether existing methods used in the evaluations process (e.g., accreditation) really delivers on its promises of upholding thorough quality standards (Eaton, 2018; Andreani et al., 2020). A related concern is about the reactivity of the evaluative mechanisms used, and which may include various actors in the higher education system resorting to the 'gaming' of indicators used for evaluative purposes, to the end of inflating their reported performances (Woelert, 2021).

As part of this experimentation with new approaches, the state did not delegate all new tasks and approaches to existing quality assurance agencies exclusively. On the contrary, the 'evaluative state' devolved into a rather complex system of checks and balances incorporating funding systems, accountability expectations directed at higher education institutions, competitive incentive systems for quality enhancement, and more market-based approaches such as national student satisfaction surveys (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015).

More market also implied that more external stakeholders were included in the various evaluative processes developed, also watering out the role of the state as key actor in shaping the evaluative designs applied. Hence, the overall direction of the development taking place over the latter 30 years is the increasing inclusion of stakeholder representation in evaluative processes (Maassen, 2000), and a constant struggle to try to find ways to coordinate and integrate the different instruments and policy areas (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011). The latter is particularly evident, for example, in complex areas such as interdisciplinarity that provide a challenge to long-stablished practices of evaluation, and where inconsistency of policy and governance mechanisms is likely to occur (see Donina, Seeber & Paleari, 2017).

Public governance in the 'evaluative society'

The developments taking place over the last three decades in the public governance of quality suggests that we in this period have witnessed a transition from an 'evaluative state' to an 'evaluative society'. One key element of this development is the proliferation of various evaluative metrics and their application to various societal domains, including many of those previously thought impervious to measurement. Underlying this development are what has been referred to as processes of "commensuration" (see Espeland & Sauder, 2007, p. 16) facilitating the transformation of qualities into metrics, which then can be used for comparative and, ultimately, evaluative purposes (Lamont, 2012).

Within the domain of higher education, the proliferation of evaluation and of the associated devices is directly associated with the institutionalisation of evaluation as a normative and legitimate activity evident across all public sectors (Dahler-Larsen, 2011), a systematic inclusion of stakeholders in evaluative processes (Maassen, 2000), and a consequential re-distribution of power and influence in the governance of higher education (Brennan, 2007). As Dill (1998) noted in his early reflections on the 'evaluative state' – the state is still an important actor in the system, not least having the formal power to design the governance arrangements within national borders. However, the state is at the same time also influenced by the institutionalisation of evaluation as a broader normative activity – putting limits as to how brave, innovative or locally responsive the evaluative system and evaluative design might be.

Part of the challenge facing the state in this process is the many layers of governance, the many actors and the many issues that is to be accommodated in the design process (Vukasovic et al., 2018). The normative expectations associated with the 'evaluative society' – including values such as openness and transparency – also frame the design options available (Huang, 2017).

It can also be questioned whether the increased number of stakeholders involved in evaluation processes actually produces the diversity and manage to accommodate various interests and dimensions in the process (Beerkens & Udam, 2017). The current attention

given to `relevance` in higher education policy is perhaps one example of a dimension which seems to take centre stage regardless of the number of stakeholders involved.

In the `evaluative society` the perhaps most noticeable characteristic is still the emergence of private actors involved in evaluative processes. In the higher education arena, the key example here is the aforementioned emergence of national and global ranking actors many of which are private corporations (Hazelkorn, 2015). While operating under the legitimacy of providing information in a `transparent way` to students and others that have an interest in the quality of higher education, these actors offer alternative ways of interpreting quality which may or may not align with the interests of the individual state and individual higher education institutions. If there is broad alignment, then these kind of private evaluation services represent a possibility of public off-loading of steering responsibilities which Neave (1998) more than two decades ago indicated could be a long-term effect of the 'evaluative state'. When not aligned, the rise of private evaluative actors spurs an evaluative competition where for example higher education institutions (and sometimes the state) have to spend more time and resources – for example related to marketing and branding initiatives - as a way to build compensatory legitimacy (Weiler, 1983). Similarly, these actors may resort to producing or procuring their own evaluative schemes that best fits their own interests. Thus, the evaluative society seems to add new evaluative processes which paradoxically are initiated as a response to existing evaluative schemes.

Glimpses into an unknown future

Is the 'evaluative society' the end of the road for evaluation in higher education? Of course, only time will tell, but if we are to learn from history, it is possible to argue that the transition from the 'evaluative state' to the 'evaluative society' most likely will result in another transition – building on the past while adding new elements. The key question is what elements we might identify in the horizon affecting the shaping of evaluative processes in the future.

Current developments do provide some indications that could drive future research agendas in this area. First, as we are currently in an era of digitalisation and the rise of big data – where the dominant issue is to capture digital footprints and use register data in a much more elaborate way than we have seen until now – it is not difficult to foresee a future where private actors may play an even more powerful role in the evaluation of higher education. An especially interesting development here is the role private tech companies play in offering the digital infrastructure of teaching, learning and research. Companies such as Instructure and big tech companies such as Google and Microsoft are already scaling up their activities in the higher education sector. The most important dimension in this development is that these companies often – as part of their contracts with higher education institutions – retain the ownership of data collected through this digital infrastructure. A possible implication is that

a state interested in evaluating the performance of their institutions of higher education has little impact on what data is ultimately collected and may even have trouble getting access to the relevant raw data in the first place for proprietary reasons. A possible future scenario here is that the role of the state will change from being an independent evaluator to becoming one of many buyers of evaluative services from a range of actors (see also van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). Such development, at least, has already occurred in key higher education policy domains, one example being the provision of tailored bibliometric datasets by commercial providers to national science policy agencies.

A second possible development already noticeable is the substantial increase in evaluative actors, private but also public, further increasing the complexity of the evaluative landscapes of higher education (Brandtner, 2017). Due to the complex and competitive relationships between these actors and their evaluative instruments, this development will most likely create more uncertainty about quality standards, criteria and judgements. A possible consequence is that the public also become more sceptical towards evaluative information provided by the different actors – including the state. This situation may also create an additional demand, and market, for meta-evaluative or individually tailored evaluative products and services and which have an 'evaluative individual' as the desired target audience. One example of this trend is the creation of a ranking system in Europe allowing individuals to personalise indicators and what weight they want to give to certain dimensions, and which has been tested out for some years. In many ways, the advent of a more individualised and 'customable' evaluation system could be seen as paving the way for the rise of the `perfect market` where all relevant information is available for the individual to make informed (and subjective) decisions about, e.g., their future studies. In this scenario, the role of the state could be further reduced to ensuring that individuals have access to the relevant data services to inform 'consumer choice' and that the data contained across various platforms communicate and are aligned (de Bree & Stoopendahl, 2020).

Thus, the road ahead is indeed an interesting one for researchers of evaluation systems and those interesting in studying how quality is assessed and shaped as part of various governance arrangements. The future we have suggested here also offers rich opportunities to analyse the future role of the state and its relationship to higher education institutions. Most likely will research conducted need to develop frameworks allowing for more complexity – while also paying attention to paradoxical outcomes (Smith & Tracey, 2016). One such paradox is that while we have access to ever increasing amounts of evaluations of higher education institutions and their activities, we are also finding it every more difficult to make sense of the data collected, and to get a grip on how the evaluative information collected can provide us with meaningful knowledge about the functioning of our higher education systems.

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