

## Legitimacy of impacts: The case of the Dutch national research evaluation framework

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Stefan de Jong<sup>1,2</sup>, Leonie van Drooge<sup>3</sup> and Ingeborg Meijer<sup>2</sup>

- 1) Luris, Leiden University, The Netherlands
- 2) CWTS, Leiden University, The Netherlands
- 3) Rathenau Instituut, The Hague, The Netherlands

### Abstract

In the 1980s, **New Public Management (NPM)** gained force as a policy paradigm for the public sector. NPM introduces a focus on efficiency and results to the public sector<sup>i</sup>. Budget cuts and the gap between scientific excellence and economic competitiveness allowed NPM to penetrate the higher education sector<sup>ii</sup>. One of the effects of NPM is the change in nature and frequency of **evaluations** in the sector, as evaluation is a key mechanism of NPM to control the performance of public organizations<sup>iii</sup>. Nowadays, evaluations no longer are a responsibility of academic peers only, as societal actors, including government, gained influence in evaluations<sup>iv</sup>.

A key outcome of evaluations for the evaluand is **legitimacy**<sup>v</sup>. Legitimacy is defined by Suchman (p. 574) as: *'...a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.'*

In this paper we are interested in *'the socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions'* captured in (national) **systems of quality assurance in academic research (SQAAR)** initiated by government. In SQAAR, norms, values, beliefs and definitions of government on quality meet those of academics.

More specifically, we are interested in the **societal impact** criterion in SQAAR. In Europe, the importance of this criterion steeply increased in the 2000's as a result of a stronger focus on the contribution of research to the knowledge economy (the Lisbon Declaration). Since then, European and national governments have articulated their ideas about societal impact of academic research stronger than ever, using concepts like knowledge transfer, pathway to impact and valorisation. Likewise academics have professional views on societal impact. Academics have engaged with societal actors long before government gained a policy interest in societal impact of science<sup>vi,vii</sup>.

Our research questions is as follows: **How do norms, values, beliefs and definitions of government concerning impact as articulated in SQAAR relate to those of academics?**

To answer this question, we take **the Netherlands as a case**, as it was among the first two countries to adopt SQAAR<sup>viii</sup>. Since 1993, all academic research in the Netherlands is evaluated retrospectively every six years (initially every four years) by a committee of (inter)national peers. The committee uses a generic framework as basis for the evaluation. Impact has been a criterion since 1993, be it under different terms and definitions.

The approach is **mixed-method**: we use quantitative and qualitative data sources. Our data include the five consecutive evaluation frameworks; all 222 evaluation reports, including scores for 4765 units, published between 1993 and 2012; eight focus groups with academics and three case

studies in different fields. This approach provides an in depth view on the governmental perspective ,the academic perspective, and their interaction.

The answer to our research question will contribute to discussions about 1) **the relationship between science policy and practice, in particular concerning social impact** and 2) **the improvement of SQAAR in order to prevent potential undesired effects.**

## References

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