

Open Letter on the Evaluation of Research in Economics

By Enrico Bellino, Garegnani Pierangelo, George Lunghin, Sergio Parrinello, Luigi Pasinetti, Pierluigi Porta, Piero Tani, Gianni Vaggio.

Different systems of research evaluation based on indirect indicators are spreading in different Italian and European academic environments, especially within economics. These systems, which assess the individual contributions of research based on the journal in which they are published, and therefore they are not directly dependent on their content and scientific value. The quality of the latter is then measured by indicators like *the Impact factor* or through the sharing of scientific journals which reflect various other factors, such as *the Impact factor* or different ones, depending on the cases.

The benefits that are attributed to this practice are several, for example: the speed and ease of expressing opinions also on work related topics not close to the competence of the evaluator. But above all, it gives to these criteria facts that are not arbitrary to the trial.

In particular, we disagree on this point entirely. The fact that we consider more important in this regard is that this type of evaluation affects more or less all the contributions of research that are not in the group of the arguments studied and the methodologies followed by most scholars. Contributions that deal with topics less popular, those who criticize premises based on the basic approach followed by most of the “international scientific community,” and other contributions who follow alternative paths of research on this approach, find virtually no space in journals that 'weight' more traditional assessments. The procedure for appointing *referees* is often not even stated, the same directors of journals suggest to those who submit their articles to send them to more 'specialized' journals. A legitimate choice for a journal, but there is no reason, for which the merit of a researcher 'must match' the editorial policy of most 'listed' journals. Thus it is attributed to the editors and *referees* for a number of journals a power of research evaluation that exceeds their natural function. When *the Impact factor* was developed for the needs of the librarians, let us remember, its inventors put their guard against its use for evaluation of the research.

The power that is so freely given to editors and *referees* of journals to decide the career of researchers, it is matched with potentially serious negative consequences for the development of the discipline. They include: a) freedom of research, since it is obvious the impetus that would be given to young people to engage in arguments permitting the publication of journals in question, rather than to issues which would have a spontaneous interest; b) a consequent incentive to comply the premises shared by the majority, with the intent of debunking even if through criticism, and discouragement independent and truly innovative work: i.e. the opposite effect that a good evaluation of research should be; c) ethics of research, connected to the thrust of intellectual conformism that arises with the consequent expulsion from the discipline of those who are genuinely interested in research. Among other things, since the journals 'listed' are for the most Anglo-Saxon, there is the danger of stifling original contribution coming from different cultural traditions (Walras or Pareto, for example, could not find some open doors in journals and publishers of those countries which are always open to foreigners, yes, but of cultural trends related).

It cannot be forgotten also that the access to most journals' listed 'depends well as an undoubted expertise in specific subjects related to these journals, also from being inserted into a network of acquaintances aiming more to the researcher ability to cultivate relationships than its ability to do research. The alternative to this must be identified by distinguishing the assessment of the work of individual teachers-researchers (usually for exams' goals, call or confirmation) from the evaluations of institutions such as universities' departments and research centers (for the purposes of allocation of resources). We will look below the first type of evaluation, restricting ourselves at the end with some reflections on the second.

In the case of evaluation of individual researchers the alternative always preferable, in the opinion of the writer, is the direct assessment of the contributions of research through their actual reading on the part of those who must evaluate, accompanied by a grading procedure aimed *specifically* at them. The practical problems of time-responses and non-congruence of works to evaluate the skills of the evaluators are quite solvable: first considering the fact that the undeniable rise of scholars to assess implies an automatic expansion of potential evaluators and that the task of selection could partly be left to the candidates, asking them to submit a limited number of researches, second using an 'expert' identified by the evaluator himself, whose opinion should be made public along with that of the evaluator. Of course, the evaluator can take into account, in its own evaluation also the place of publication of research work that has to be judged, but this is an integral part of the assessment process and there is no reason to require or constrain with criteria imposed from outside.

The assumption of responsibility by a person, who is called upon to evaluate, and the transparency of the proceeding through the reviews quickly made public (eg through Internet), and from which the evaluators themselves can be judged, makes it somewhat difficult or penalize the adoption of arbitrary criteria: it depends on the reputation of the evaluators.

We are of course aware of the abuses occurred in the past and condemn them. We, on the other hand, seem at odds from thinking that these abuses are preventable with mechanical rules. They have their roots in the university structure, the degradation of the relationship teacher-student, in concentrations of power that the system allows. Hampered in their traditional forms, abuses easily find other forms as, for example, the manipulation of bibliographic results where possible, and as authoritatively written. Moreover traditional abuses are expression of an individual power and therefore tend to a certain independence from each-other: unfortunately they negatively affect the outcome of some, but not all competitive exams, on the other hand, the automatic nature of the proposed solutions would be a remedy worse than the disease, for those reasons above. This discrimination can be dangerous to the development of discipline, which, like all science requires greater freedom of choice of subjects and how to study, especially in a time of widespread unease about the state of the discipline, as recorded for several years. We must indeed be careful that, behind the defense of a (too often self-centered) 'studies solemnity', do not hide their intention to promote particular theoretical orientations or, worse, details of economic political agendas. We all know that economics is a scientific field, disturbed by the interest powers that are called to investigate. An atmosphere of intellectual freedom is indispensable.

Partially different considerations seem possible in order to evaluate research institutions (universities, departments of universities, research centers). For this purpose, it seems that in order to understand a partial reference to bibliometric indicators is needed. Within this context, on specific individual researchers must give way to assessments medium. In this case the reference to bibliometric indicators seem less harmful, provided of course that these indices are purified of their partisanship and include, in addition to magazine articles, other publications such as monographs and essays included in volumes of serious provenience.¹

In conclusion: many supporters of *the Impact factor* use as an example of good research the one coming from the United States. In this respect, it seems appropriate to quote a survey sponsored by our Society of Economists responsible for recruiting in the best economics departments of American universities, regarding the use of bibliometric criteria for assessing research.² One of these , also reflecting the content the remaining responses, said 'Frankly, if the work were academic evaluated in this mechanical way, the United States would not be at the head of science'. And us? Should we just feel so different?

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¹ Con riferimento a tale ambito le proposte elaborate da Cristina Marcuzzo e da Giulia Zacchia, di costruire uno o più indicatori a partire dalla banca dati di Econlit ci sembra un accettabile punto di partenza (si veda C. Marcuzzo -G. Zacchia, "L'ECONLIT e gli strumenti per la valutazione della ricerca economica in Italia", *Rivista italiana degli economisti*, vol. 2, agosto 2007, pp. 277-306).

² Si veda S. Bowles, "La valutazione della ricerca negli Stati Uniti: risultati di un questionario", *Rivista italiana degli economisti*, vol. 2, agosto 2007, pp. 255-58.