Professionalization in and for Evaluation

Position Paper of the DeGEval – Gesellschaft für Evaluation (Evaluation Society) Management Board

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The 16th Annual Conference of the DeGEval – Gesellschaft für Evaluation e.V., which we carried out together with the Swiss Evaluation Society SEVAL in Zurich in 2014, dealt with the issue of professionalization in and for evaluation: How can professionalism be ensured, what can be or is to be meant when talking about professionalism, or what exactly should our evaluation society contribute in order to make evaluation an indispensable instrument for the decision making process in all societal and political fields?

The choice of this topic was not solely based on the fact that the support of a continuous development process of evaluation practice and standards is explicitly stipulated in the DeGEval's statutes and thus leads to the question of the significance of "professionalism". It is also a prevailing topic at present since there are intensive ongoing discussions in several evaluation societies in Germany and in other countries about this battery of questions. Last but not least, the success story of evaluation necessitates a debate that is able to provide better orientation.

However, the success story of evaluation can definitely be described as being quite ambivalent. On the one hand, there is hardly any political decision made today without at least some reference to evaluation. This applies to Europe in particular. In the German speaking countries, "evaluation" has not been regarded as a kind of foreign word that evokes resistance in those affected for quite some time. On the other hand, there are a number of activities such as simple feedbacks, audits, or psychometric tests that are wrongly called evaluations since they are not able to reach the standards of professional program or organization evaluation, even though there might be some overlapping aspects. Furthermore, it is not quite clear if someone who calls himself/herself an evaluator, is really appropriately qualified enough. So far a reliable outline of the profession has been missing.

The topic "professionalization of evaluation" and the challenges attached to it may be discussed in the form of thesis and antithesis. Thus, guidelines can be drawn up that mark the lines within which discussions can take place. They can be phrased as questions:

- ✓ Is it sufficient to have a thorough knowledge about the respective political field in order to be able to evaluate this? Or does it suffice to have evaluation competence to be able to evaluate in any old field?
- ✓ Are quality and quantity of the certainly very heterogeneous offers for the development of evaluation competence sufficient? Or will the range of course offerings have to be systematically extended and accredited?
- ✓ Should training and professional development courses rather be localized in the political area? Or does it make more sense to make generic offers?
- ✓ Do the available evaluation standards with regard to quality development suffice? Or are further measures required that go beyond that, such as controlling and examining measures to safeguard standards and, if necessary, to sanction noncompliance?

- ✓ Can the quality of evaluation only be ensured by more stringent and more systematic regulations such as e.g. a certification of evaluators? Or do self-definition and possibly a membership in the DeGEval in Germany and Austria suffice to act as evaluators?
- ✓ Is the quality of an evaluation defined by the parties involved? Or is an external assessment and complaints body required?

This addresses a wide range of possible issues and challenges. At the one end of the spectrum the question arises what kind of quality evaluations must have and which competencies evaluators must possess in order to be able to talk about "good" evaluation. At the other end, there is the question if and in how far accreditation and certification of evaluators should define the field of professional evaluation.

Subsequent to the discussions at our annual conference and numerous internal debates on the two ends of the problem "good evaluation" and "certification and accreditation" that also included several experts, we feel that we are closer to the former. Wherever our position tends to open up to the latter – in particular with regard to certification – it is in favor of voluntariness.

Given the political fields in which evaluators move and the importance of evaluation results as evidences in highly relevant societal decision processes, this is indeed quite a moderate position.

Our general objections and concerns against strong regulation refer to the fact that evaluation has not yet advanced enough on the "classical" way towards professionalism despite its development. In Austria and Germany, we have just about made the first steps on the way towards a "profession": evaluation is carried out on a commercial basis, it is taught and researched, and the stakeholders have organized themselves. But evaluation is still far away from being able to fulfill an institutionalized function within the political sector. A professional profile has not yet been reliably defined, either. Owing to the multidisciplinarity of evaluation that collects and brings together the methodological knowledge of empirical social research and assessment as well as the special expertise of the respective research area, the development of a professional profile that embraces this duality seems by no means trivial. We are still far away from governmental recognition and approval as a profession.

All along this way a number of questions remain unanswered: Who should enunciate in a mandatory and legally-binding way what evaluation, i.e. good evolution, really is? Who should be certified by whom in order to subsequently certify others? Who should pass a fair judgment on the quality of an evaluation in a legal case between the commissioning and the evaluating body – with possibly considerable consequences – that is professional as well binding for all the participants? What are the consequences of mandatory certification and thus the potential exclusion of several of today's evaluating bodies?

Last but not least, the number of individuals and institutions organized in the DeGEval limits the possibilities, but also the need for stronger accreditation and certification at present. We still have not yet our member potential in Germany and Austria, and the entire work in the research groups and in the board is done on an honorary basis.

However, we do indeed follow processes based on voluntariness such as the initiative of mutual assessment (Voluntary Evaluator Peer Review) or the standardized procedure in

Canada to become a “credentialed evaluator”, but our impressions are that those procedures are very intricate and costly and not at all indisputable as to their legitimacy.

Against the background of the developments in Germany and Austria so far, it is first and foremost about further developing the qualification landscape. Some initiatives are taking place at present. The DeGEval offers a platform that collects offers and proposals for training and professional development courses in the evaluation sector and systematically describes them on the basis of standard criteria. One project group is presently working on a teaching course “Evaluation” that could be integrated in the methodology seminars of social science degree programs.

We will continue to work on strengthening the DeGEval’s standards of evaluation. Each member can contribute to this by offering project-related discussions of these standards in the context of evaluations. We also think that an increased inclusion of those bodies that actually commission evaluations seems worthwhile: the cooperation of evaluating and commissioning institutions and organizations constitutes one of the conditions for a high-quality evaluation. We as an evaluation society will certainly increase our efforts even further to come into contact with those who commission evaluations. The description of the evaluators’ competencies might also lead to a revision process and thus result in a firm establishment of such competencies by means of precisely described curricular elements.

There is one further stimulus that we actually owe to the European Evaluation Society (EES). They discuss certain “cases” on a special platform. The idea is that it might be useful to learn more about actual evaluations. Whenever possible, real evaluation studies should be made visible: learning on the case. This is very similar to the challenge to intensify research on evaluation.

The DeGEval’s strength also depends on its size. We would like to continue being open to people who are “somehow” involved with evaluation. All our activities like e.g. the publications, the conferences organized by our research groups and the annual convention aim at professionalizing our members in matters of evaluation. However, interested candidates will not have to pass an entry test in order to become members.

There are quite a few interesting prospects for the DeGEval as on organization as well as for its members as far as advancing professionalization of evaluation is concerned: winning new, interested and qualified members, spreading the standards of good evaluation even further, cooperating with professional associations whose members are also involved in the evaluation sector, strengthening the external communication with those who commission evaluations, and the cooperation with evaluation societies in other countries. Ultimately, it is exchange and reflection that, in our opinion, leads the way towards a stronger professionalization of evaluation. These first steps might even be the stepping stones towards a certification process.