

Evaluation and knowledge society

Position paper of the Board of DeGEval-Evaluation Society

The move towards a “knowledge society” has already attracted broad public and scientific attention with the work of Daniel Bell in the early 1970s. Knowledge and its role in society have been analysed in manifold ways in connection with knowledge politics and the knowledge economy. It is no coincidence that the development of the knowledge society has occurred alongside an increasing importance of evaluation. Evaluation as such is a process for the generation of knowledge.

“Evaluation and knowledge society” formed the underlying of the annual conference of the DeGEval – Evaluation Society in Speyer in 2015.

- Evaluation fulfils a need generated by the move towards a knowledge society

Societal governance processes as well as individual actions nowadays increasingly rely on knowledge, which is enhanced by new technological developments for data processing and digitalization, as stressed by Wolfgang Böttcher in his introductory speech at the conference to the meeting. This is relevant at organizational level, but also for other parts of society or even entire societies. Modernization concepts such as “better or smarter regulation” as well as “open government” are hardly conceivable without specific forms of knowledge generation, processing and exploitation.

- Evidence from evaluation is generated by manifold use of methods

Evaluations represent evidence in the widest sense, which needs to be framed by theory and methodology. In his conference-opening keynote Stefan Kuhlmann stressed that one should not overhastily talk about a hierarchy of “good” or “bad” evidence, “good” or “bad” knowledge. In the demand for an evidence-based approach priority is usually given to quantitative randomized and controlled studies that follow an experimental design. This does not take into account that there are several alternative evaluation designs that can also contribute to our knowledge. Indeed, it might be more appropriate to collect different evidences on the same item in order to triangulate evidence.

- Secure connectivity of knowledge produced by evaluation

An important function of evaluation in the knowledge society is the preparation of knowledge in a way that makes connectivity and use possible. The results of evaluation projects should not end up in the drawer, but be merged to a knowledge base about effects of measures in the different fields. This newly generated knowledge should be compatible with discourses in different fields or systems – e.g. contribute to the dissemination of knowledge generated in the knowledge system and the inclusion in politics. Evaluation therefore fulfils the function of being “translator” between scientific knowledge aimed at general contexts on the one hand on the other of providing detailed action requests of actors in specific settings. Evaluation can help to translate general knowledge and adapt it to specific contexts.

- Aim: contributions to the public debate, improvement of democratization

Knowledge bases which are fed by evaluations can be used for social decision processes in different areas. Contemporary evaluation is developing towards being knowledge based multi-methods research on specific questions which puts the interests of its clients into focus. Evaluation can thus through knowledge which is being provided to ever-growing degree and support stakeholders in the design of their actions. Wherever the use of public funds is involved, it always refers to society as a whole. The professionalization of evaluators is based on increasing understanding of theory and methods and can thus also stick to the emancipatory promise of the knowledge society.