



**Position Paper of the Board of DeGEval - Evaluation Society**

# **The Future of Evaluation**

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# Position Paper of the Board of DeGEval on the Future of Evaluation

The theme of the 20th annual conference of DeGEval - Gesellschaft für Evaluation e.V. was 'The Future of Evaluation – Evaluation for the Future'. DeGEval took advantage of this anniversary conference to reflect on its 20-year history, during which the society has contributed to the recent success story of evaluation in the German-speaking countries. Looking ahead, it was also apparent that although good evaluation is now used more than ever before in a wide range of societal areas, the continuation of this success story cannot be taken for granted.

In the points that follow, the DeGEval board has summarised the discussions that took place and the conclusions reached.

## Evaluation and civil society

- In recent times, the use of fake news has reached unprecedented levels as an instrument of public debate. Sections of the public have begun not only to sceptically challenge scientific evidence to a substantial degree, but to fundamentally reject it and replace it with self-confirming 'realities' of their own. As a professional evaluation society, we are very **concerned** about this trend.
- However, we believe that good evaluation can be an effective tool for achieving greater transparency with regard to state and non-state action. Through the systematic examination of policies, it is able to provide a substantiated, evidence-based assessment of their planning, implementation and effect. We therefore see evaluation as an important instrument with which to **support debate and decision-making in civil society**.
- With this in mind, we would call on everyone who is concerned with strengthening civil society to be more active in **calling for and supporting the evaluation of public action**. This includes:
  - Pressing politicians, administrators, public institutions, foundations and other state and non-state actors to apply a verifiable evidence basis in decision-making processes
  - Calling for an examination of the effects of policies and how these policies take effect
  - Calling for available evidence always to be taken into consideration in political decision-making processes

## Politics and administration

- In recent years there has been a steady increase in the **use of the term 'evaluation'** in the political sphere, for example in parliamentary work. However, this increase remains

largely nominal as there has been little rise in demand for evaluation, for example from parliaments. In politics, there is still therefore an implementation deficit.

- The same applies to administration. Although the Federal Budget Code (*Bundeshaushaltsordnung*) stipulates that checks should be implemented to monitor achievement of aims, effect and cost-effectiveness, this is by no means carried out **continuously or across the board**. There is a lack of systematic preparation, of definition of measurable goals, and of resources and competencies to implement examinations of effectiveness and efficiency. The *Bundesrechnungshof* (Federal Court of Auditors) regularly points to this shortcoming in its annual reports.
- Politicians are therefore also called upon to make greater use of evaluation **in the political process**. In particular, evaluation can be used as part of parliamentary checks to review the implementation and effects of policies. Due to its explicitly evaluative perspective, it is superior to purely descriptive control instruments such as auditing and monitoring in this respect.

### Evaluation in organizations and institutions

- Many public, commercial and non-commercial organizations and institutions use evaluation. These include, for example, administrative bodies, educational and healthcare institutions, foundations and companies which evaluate their activities and initiatives internally or commission evaluations from external service providers.
- It is likely that we will see an **increase in the importance of internal evaluations** in which evaluation tasks are performed by sub-units of the organization. It is important that these too are subject to professional evaluation standards, as formulated in DeGEval's *Standards for Evaluation*.
- In various sectors, for example higher education, the question is regularly raised as to whether **ongoing evaluation systems in particular are appropriate and beneficial**. We consider this question to be a legitimate one, as the Standards for Evaluation define *utility* as the first criterion of good evaluation.
- In organizations and institutions, the utility of evaluations can be ensured most honestly when evaluation is firmly embedded in organizational structures and processes. The best way to ensure this is through an **evaluation policy**, which clarifies for a particular area of validity what is being evaluated, when, how often, by whom and for what purpose. It also specifies in advance where the results are to be used and who is responsible for this use, as well as ensuring conscious use of resources and preventing purely ritualized forms of evaluation.
- We encourage all organizations and institutions which aim to use evaluation beneficially to **develop an evaluation policy** of this nature.

### Evaluation and academia

- The fact that evaluation is increasingly becoming an academic field of research may be regarded as a sign of success. This is reflected, for example, in the number of

professorships for which evaluation forms part of the title, often in addition to research methods or subject-specific areas.

- However, as demonstrated by DeGEval's *Standards for Evaluation*, among other things, evaluation itself is **transdisciplinary**. This transdisciplinary nature cannot be reduced to methodological aspects alone, because good evaluation consists of more than merely the application of social sciences methodologies.
- The further development of evaluation therefore requires the establishment of dedicated **professorships for evaluation** at universities in Germany and Austria which take this transdisciplinary aspect into account. This is also an important prerequisite to allow the many early career researchers who are qualifying in evaluation to pursue this area of research as a specific career path.
- Like other areas of activity, evaluation depends upon an empirical knowledge basis for its professional practice. So far, however, the corresponding research has mostly taken place in the context of subject-specific investigations (e.g. the use of evaluation results in schools), which results in a fragmented knowledge basis. What is therefore needed is more explicit **research into evaluation** which adopts a transdisciplinary approach and seeks to promote a dialogue on evaluation research in various areas of action.

### Professionalization of evaluation

- Evaluation is an **unprotected term**. In practice, a range of very different activities are referred to as evaluation. Because evaluation is still a relatively young field and subject to dynamic changes, efforts to restrict access to evaluation as a professional activity seem to us to be premature.
- However, open access should not be misunderstood as a licence to interpret the term freely. The most important **reference point** for evaluation is **professional evaluation standards**. The DeGEval standards require that evaluation should not be limited to simply measuring, but should offer **utility, propriety, feasibility and accuracy**. We call upon everyone who conducts evaluation and offers it as a service to commit themselves to compliance with the DeGEval Standards for Evaluation.
- We also call on those who commission evaluations to be aware of their responsibility to enable good evaluation. **Evaluation clients** can contribute to the quality of evaluation through realistic expectations, by allowing adequate time for the work to be carried out, and by making adequate resources available.

### Evaluation practice

- As a young, transdisciplinary profession, evaluation has so far only developed uniformly accepted and unambiguous terminology to a limited extent. The professionalization of an activity requires the development of **unambiguous terminology** as an important prerequisite for internal and external comprehension. With the newly revised Standards for Evaluation, DeGEval has adopted a **glossary of key evaluation terms** that is intended to be used as a reference to clarify terminology issues in cases of doubt.

- As the use of evaluation increases, as can already be observed in some areas, it is important to ensure that no negative saturation occurs. The risk of 'off-the-peg' evaluation is that it may become little more than well-developed monitoring and make it difficult to discern unintended or unusual factors. This risk may arise from both routine evaluations by evaluators and detailed, extensive specifications on the part of clients.

Discussions at DeGEval's 20th annual conference also revealed that the tools and methods required for the evaluation of the future are available. Trends can be systematically extrapolated, scenarios can be developed, and discontinuities of trends can be identified and assigned a probability of occurrence. The best way to actively shape the future is to discuss the past and the present situation and to formulate requirements. DeGEval will continue to contribute to this in the years ahead by creating the opportunity for dialogue through the newsletter, magazine, conferences and workshops. Everyone with an interest in evaluation is invited to participate: internal and external evaluators, clients, stakeholders and decision-makers in administration and politics. We would be delighted if this position paper encouraged you to get in touch with us.

### **Board of DeGEval**

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