

# The Temple and its Guardians:

## An Excursion into the Rhetoric of Evaluating Higher Education

Guy Neave\*

### 1. Introduction.

Almost 2000 years ago, a writer in one of Europe's ancient tongues – Latin – posed a famous question, not unlike a 'kon' that spiritual masters require their disciples to ponder on. That question remains eternally important for Democracy and – I would suggest – for Evaluation in Higher Education. It is "Who Guards the Guardians themselves?" (*Quis custodes ipsos custodet?*)

In so many ways, Evaluation systems are the public's guardians over what the University is doing. And how it is doing it. They have been set in place to keep watch on behalf of the voters and taxpayers. It is a watch that grows more complex as the tasks the University has been asked to take on become themselves more weighty. And those tasks become more weighty as more young people – and nowadays, people not so young – seek to extend their knowledge into the realms of Higher Learning.

The Rhetoric of Evaluation is an unusual perspective on the topic of Evaluation. Those of us who have followed the rise of the Evaluative State in Western Europe (Neave & van Vught, 1991; Henkel & Little, 1994; Neave, 1998) are well aware of the rhetorical element. Few of us have either the time or the inclination to look at it more closely. Rather, we have been taken up with the ways evaluation systems function, with their mission and purpose, the impact they have had upon the institutions they have been entrusted to scrutinise. In short, for many of us, evaluation systems are a channel through which we may examine the changing relationship between State, University and Society. Indeed, the public discourse that accompanied the rise of systems of evaluation has been subjected to unintended rather than benign neglect.

The reason for this is not difficult to find. Disciplines which, in Western Europe, bear the brunt of analysing the changing landscape of higher education tend to lie in the areas of Economics, Sociology, Politics, Government and Public Administration – the latter above all in the Netherlands. History is not aloof. But Literature and Modern Languages, where the dissecting of discourse and rhetoric have their being, are rather more rare in this domain.

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\* Guy Neave is Director of Research at the International Association of Universities, Paris, France and Professor and Scientific Director of the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, Universiteit Twente, The Netherlands.

The views in this paper are those of the author in his personal capacity. They do not express those of either the International Association of Universities or of Twente University.

## 2. Rhetoric as a Field of Study: some basic considerations.

Rhetoric, of course, is the art of argumentation, of persuasion, of public address. For centuries, it stood at the heart of higher learning, part of the scholastic tradition, which flourished in the Medieval universities in Europe. (de Ridder Simoens, 1992) In contrast to the American universities where even today, rhetoric forms part of the undergraduate Liberal Arts programme, in Europe to all intents and purposes the formal study of rhetoric has vanished from the lecture halls and seminar rooms of our mass higher education systems. If rhetoric has survived at all, it is as an ancillary subject, as part of the regime for those studying medieval civilisation or the Ancient Classical languages of Latin and Greek. And they are not many!

## 3. Evaluation as a Field of Growth.

Before going into the thick of the topic, let us note the very considerable development in the drive towards evaluation systems in Europe. The first step in along this road was taken in 1985 by the creation of the National Evaluation Committee in France. (Staropoli, 1987) Since then, the proliferation of Evaluation systems has been remarkable. As of the summer of 2002, in the 30 national systems which form part of the European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies, itself set up in Finland in 1988, some 34 agencies are concerned with Evaluation and Accreditation. Not only is the issue of evaluation of central concern to individual States, some inside the European Union, others waiting for admission. It is clearly no less important in the trans-national domain. (van der Wende, 2001) Moreover, it is a trend that is accelerating.

Though the European dimension in this field is both recent and is relatively unformed, it stands as a level of operation, which elsewhere has largely been absent from this activity. Evaluation, in Europe as elsewhere began within individual Member States. Naturally, it was applied to and shaped with the specificities of individual national systems of higher education. But the experience of the pioneers – the French, the British and above all the Dutch has fed in very quickly and contributed substantially, though not always positively, it has to be said – to the implantation of Evaluation systems in other European States.

In my exploration of Rhetoric, and Evaluation, I will concentrate, however, on four national systems. These are Britain, the Netherlands, France and Sweden. I could justify this on purely pragmatic grounds by saying that, at various times in my career, I have worked in all four. So, I feel on reasonably solid ground. There are, however, other reasons. These reasons are more scholarly. Each of these systems has justified the establishment of Evaluation systems on very different grounds. These grounds, if certainly technical, are also determined by the cultural, social and political values each has vested in its system of higher education. These values are central to the Rhetoric of Evaluation. So we will concentrate on them.

#### 4. Different Rhetorical Doctrines.

If we look closely that the discourse which accompanied the first moves towards setting up Evaluation systems in Western Europe, we see very clearly two separate lines of argument. The first is best qualified as 'political'. Its origins lay in such countries as France, Sweden, Belgium and, later, Spain. The second, by contrast, drew its inspiration from the United States, took root in Britain and, in a less virulent form, in the Netherlands. More particularly, the latter contained a discourse drawing on supply side economic theory. Today, this doctrine sails under various flags depending on the degree of legitimacy public debate accords it in different European countries – Liberalism in Britain, Neo Liberalism in the Netherlands and Germany or Ultra-Liberalism in France. That a broadly similar doctrine is presented in very different terms is far from coincidental. The stronger the 'political discourse' in public debate the less legitimate this specific economic theory. Or to put matters slightly differently, those countries where the political mode of discourse predominated were precisely those where public discourse saw Economic Liberalism less in terms of an agenda for action so much as a political ideology. As a political ideology, Liberalism was judged according to the place it occupied and the consideration it commanded in the party politics of the moment.

#### 5. The Politics of Evaluation: a strangely ignored thing.

In the setting up of Evaluative systems, the issue of partisan politics tends either to be played down or largely ignored. This is both surprising and understandable. It is surprising precisely because a debate so central to the development of higher education can so quickly be transformed into a 'taken for granted'. It is understandable for the simple reason that those concerned with its construction tended by and large, to be technicians. They were specialists interested in devising procedures, techniques, and taken up with the appropriateness, accuracy and sensitivity of verification rather than with the political origins and decisions that had created this opportunity for them to indulge in their expertise. Second, the debate that took place as Evaluation systems began to take shape in such countries as Britain, the Netherlands and France, was largely pre-determined. It was predetermined by the decision made earlier at the level of national politics. For example, that the Evaluation system in the Netherlands was justified by experts within the terms of advancing, 'public choice' (van Vught, 1989) reflected in the debate within the Tweede Kamer that set the frame within which the Dutch Evaluation system was to develop.

#### 6. Two Currents of Thought.

The rise of Evaluation systems in Western Europe may be viewed in terms of two broad currents of thought. Where they diverged, however, was less at the technical level of procedures. Indeed, from the purely procedural aspect, one may detect a high degree of commonalty – of shared ways of doing things.

Thus, for instance, today, most evaluation systems are grounded in a four stage model – internal self assessment, external visitation, joint evaluation and public report. (Thune, 2002) But this inner convergence should not distract us from the basic fact that Evaluation as a political construct has been debated within very different rhetorical settings. These settings – the first grounded in a mode of discourse in which the frame of debate revolved around an Economic interpretation and the second in a political interpretation, of social change. They are basic to our understanding of the context in which Evaluation systems emerged. They are also fundamental to its purpose. Evaluation, from this perspective, is simply an instrument to operationalise these two concepts and to seat them in the fabric of higher education.

## **7. The Secondary Debate.**

The points of divergence between the two visions of Evaluation did not, as I have suggested, focus on the technicalities of Evaluation, though this secondary debate was conducted with both sophistication and bitterness between Ministry experts, international civil servants and their counterparts in the university world. (Johns & Taylor, 1993; Cave et al (2nd edtn) 1991) Such a debate over the sensitivity of performance indicators, on which types of indicators were appropriate, important though it might be, was from the university's standpoint, little more than a heroic defence of a position already outflanked in the political domain.

## **8. Shaping Evaluation Systems:**

In effect, the shape of Evaluation systems and their purpose revolved around three major issues. These were the place of the State in what today would be broadly qualified as 'innovation' and in advancing social change; the place of competition and the place of the private sector.

### ***The Role of the State.***

Divergence between the two schools of thought was most evident in the rhetoric surrounding the place of the State and its effectiveness in adjusting higher education to the expanding demands of the private sector of the Economy. Rhetoric both in Britain and, though to a lesser extent, the Netherlands – the heartland of the vision Economic – was largely negative in this regard. Despite the fact that in both countries, as with the rest of Europe, mass higher education had itself been the exclusive product of State initiative, the State was looked upon as exercising overmuch control, being too 'rigid in its ability to meet demands, largely unpredictable, that economic change would make upon higher education. Thus the rhetoric of 'rolling back the frontiers of the state', the better to give full reign to the natural initiative for the individual to seek his or her own interests, formed one of the slogans of the hour. The market would replace the state as society's main regulator. The State's main obligation would be to ensure that the individual consumer – who is an

economic entity not a political one – enjoyed the maximum liberty to exercise his choice that was compatible with law and order. This, in short, was a minimalist view of the State.

A very different view prevailed in France, Sweden and Spain. Certainly, concern about the nation's capacity to modernise was no less present. But it did not challenge the State as the prime social regulator. Rather, debate assumed, as I have said, a political road. And whilst the objectives of efficiency were abundantly evident, the way for achieving it was couched in terms of democratic participation on the one hand, and various combinations of administrative decentralisation and devolution on the other. Debate turned around two points: first, re-drawing the political and administrative map of the country – a process especially evident in France and Spain. And second, by reinforcing some argued, restoring – political power to the regions, above all in the matter of tax-raising and in education. In France the principle of universities passing contracts with the region was acknowledged in the Higher Education Guideline Law of 1989. And in Spain, the creation of the Autonomous Communities in 1983 with even more marked capacities. (Garcia Garrido, 1992) In short, there was no attempt to replace the State as society's prime regulator by the market.

Rhetoric focused rather on a different way of 'fine tuning' society's demands upon higher education. Such fine-tuning involved foreshortening the chain of negotiation and dialogue by opening up the university to the region. At the same time, by conferring upon the region the responsibility for part of the budget of the universities in it, government also sought to diversify the sources of funding.

The key issue in France, Spain and Sweden was never couched in terms of 'rolling back the frontiers of the State'. If anything, change involved extending them and re-siting them. No less important, this process, sometimes identified with 'the offloading State' (Neave & van Vught, 1991) rarely if ever, invoked the rhetoric of 'privatisation' – that is, expressed in terms political rather than the usual financial, the redefinition of higher education as a private good. From this it followed that the rhetorical device of re-defining students as 'consumers' was equally absent from the discourse which accompanied the development of higher education in these countries and of Evaluation systems as part of it.

### *Participant Democracy.*

There are, not surprisingly, good reasons behind the rhetorical power and appeal of the collectivity – of the 'public' domain – as opposed to the Liberal rhetoric of the 'private interest'. They go far in explaining at one and the same time, the change in political rhetoric in Britain and its preservation in France and Spain particularly in the matter of students as 'consumers' vs. 'citizens'. In France and Sweden, the reform of higher education had, since the uproar of 1968, been driven forward in a very concrete manner, by the pressures of participant democracy. Indeed, this rhetoric, in Spain, had revived in no uncertain manner with the thaw in public life that, following the demise of the Franco regime, took place over the years 1978 to 1983. (McNair 1984; Coombes & Perkins, 1988) To dissociate Evaluation from the rhetoric of democracy, and instead to associate it with the ability to 'consume' of which the least that may be said about it, is its

power to discriminate between individuals, would therefore have been unwise; in the extreme. Quite apart from breaking apart an entente between governments and students which in France and Spain very certainly had the means of asserting itself vociferously and which in Sweden, lay at the heart of that country's consensus ,Politics. (Premfors, 1982)

### *Competition.*

That countries endorsing the supremacy of economics as the lever of social change were, in the case of the Netherlands, prepared to renegotiate that consensus – or in the case of Britain, to break it – shows how radical the Prince was prepared to be vis a vis his academic subjects. Such a stance goes far in explaining both the perception and the reception that academia in these systems reserved for the scrutiny of Evaluation. However, differences in the role of the State, of participant democracy and of economics as a device to gird up the loins of academia also extended to the principle of competition.

Competition and emulation are, of course, one side of the medal. The other side is regulation, the setting of rules. Rules serve either to limit competition, to define the conditions under which it takes place or to enhance it. Thus they determine who may compete against whom just as they may also define, more often tacitly than not, the consequences which follow from being 'winners' or 'losers'. To the extent that being a winner or a loser affects status, self-esteem and identity, as much for individuals as for institutions, competition is a powerful lever for mobilisation. How far competition may be applied as a basic social principle before it begins to threaten the cohesion of the social fabric – or for that matter, the ability of higher education to effectively discharge the responsibilities society or the Prince bestow upon it – is a crucial issue. And that issue is reflected in the variations in the weighting and importance different systems, of higher education attribute to it.

## **9. Lack of Purchase.**

At this point, it is useful to recall some of the basic features of higher education in Europe. They serve to remind us of some of the differences, but also to point out some of the difficulties entailed in bringing competition into the public arena as a lever to enhance performance, output and productivity. Bringing competition into the public arena has been one of the most significant developments that Evaluation systems have brought about.: But we can grasp its significance only if we bear in mind that certain aspects that are key to competition between universities in the United States – the home of economic Liberalism – are subject in Western Europe to national legislation. They were not free for the institution or province, to define. Amongst these are the pay-scales of academic staff, the conditions of academic employment (tenure) the level of student fees (in Germany, for instance, these do not even exist!) and the conditions of student access to higher education. In other words, higher education in its public life (for this distinction see Trow, 1978) was most assuredly not based on a 'market rationale'. And to add to this, it is also worthwhile noting

that whilst private higher education is not entirely absent from the European landscape of higher education, no-where does it account for more than 10 percent of the total student body. In other words, no-where did the private sector pose a viable and competitive alternative to the State sector. In short, higher education was part of what I have called elsewhere a 'regulated order'. (Neave, 2002) Thus, if competition were to be part of the driving force of higher education, it had to be injected by government policy, even if its operational features were subsequently elaborated by the agencies of public purpose created to administer this function.

## 10. The Different Location of Competition.

This is not to say that competition shone by its absence. Quite on the contrary. But competition tended to be located elsewhere in European systems. First, it was most evident amongst the student estate, not necessarily to have a place in higher education, so much as to have a place in the Faculty of their choice. The second arena of competition lay inside academia itself, in the struggle for repute, for research funding – for standing and honour accorded by one's peers. In effect, the 'regulated order' of European higher education afforded very little immediate purchase over those elements – student fees, staff salaries and conditions of academic employment – which lie at the heart of market driven competition. And in certain systems, France, Germany being the more obvious, the option of increasing student fees was ruled out by the obvious threat of unrest and unruly behaviour.

Yet, competition, despite the absence of obvious points of leverage most European systems presented, was a vital element in galvanising higher education. Introducing it as an element in public policy, however, was an entirely different matter. Here again, we find ourselves confronted with two very different lines of approach – that followed by the UK and the Netherlands, on the one hand and that espoused by France and Sweden on the other. For the first two, competition lay at the heart of the Liberal economic interpretation of higher education. The question was on which group should it first focus? On students? On academic leadership? On the teaching body in higher education? Second, how to bring competition from the private arena of higher education into the public domain?

## 11. Competition: a point of conflict or consensus.

Earlier, I mentioned that one outcome of introducing Evaluation Systems in Britain and the Netherlands involved, in the case of Britain a break-up of the consensus between Academic Oligarchy and the State. I also pointed out that the Netherlands renegotiated this consensus. Nowhere is this interpretation better illustrated than in the ways employed to inject competition as the prime driving force in higher education in place of the notion of social demand and the rhetoric that accompanied it. Competition is dependent on incentives. They in their turn may take the form of positive reward or the negative threat of chastisement

and public humiliation. The Prince may choose to govern his academic subjects with the sword or with the staff. Crudely expressed, Britain opted for the former, the Netherlands for the latter.

## **12. Britain: competition as; conflict.**

In Britain, the build up of arguments in support of competition came largely from the government of the day. They turned around first, the inefficient use of resources and the inadequacies of established forms of collegial governance to adapt the university to the changing needs of the economy. And, if the thrust of rhetoric spread out to envelop the academic Estate generally, it focused first on the role and responsibilities of academic leadership. Already in 1986, aspersions were cast upon the inadequacies of that model of leadership which functioned as first amongst equals of the Academic Estate – namely the British Vice Chancellor. (Jarratt Report, 1986) The alternative proposed was drawn straight from industrial practice. Institutional leadership, it was suggested,; should take on functions similar to the Chief Executive Officer in a large firm. Henceforth, efficiency was defined on the basis of criteria which, if in part derived from higher education, owed much to private sector industry.

This, combined with a more general attack on the academic profession for failing to put its house in order, impelled British university leadership to launch a species of pre-emptive strike. They setup an Audit office inside the British equivalent to the National Conference of Presidents and Vice Chancellors – the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals. As an attempt to forestall government from imposing further and more detailed evaluatory instruments, this manoeuvre was not a success.

Effectively, and over the ensuing eight years, evaluation ceased being an outpost of the universities to becoming a ~ form of specialised para-statal body, directly answerable to government and largely independent of higher education – a move that ultimately led to the creation the Quality Assurance Agency in 1996. This move was far more than a matter of administrative convenience. It was also highly symbolic. It was symbolic of the suspicion that government entertained about the ability of academia on its own to put its' house in order. It was symbolic of the belief, widely held in government circles, that without closer control, academia, deeply hostile to the notion of public competition, could not be trusted to adopt it with the rigour and enthusiasm the Prince demanded.

## **13. The Netherlands: evaluation as symbol of a new consensus.**

Though the Netherlands shared in many of the objectives which we see operating in Britain – greater efficiency, in resource usage, more responsiveness to economic change and the importance of competition as a lever for institutional mobilisation – both negotiations and rhetoric were remarkable for the absence of recrimination and distrust. (Neave, 2001) Installing a competitive ethos in the Dutch higher education system obeyed a very different rhetoric. In essence this turned around two dimensions: first, a formal



withdrawal of the central Ministry from detailed intervention and control; (de Boer, Denters & Goedegebuure, 2000) second, a corresponding increase in institutional latitude and responsibility. This was particularly visible in such matters as budgeting, increased Presidential and management powers and, last but not least, the power to determine appointments, contracts and salary scales of academic staff – areas previously subject to national legislation. (De Weert & van Vught Thyssen, 1998)

By this means, the Dutch government gradually unlocked some of the key functions that stood in the way of competition, both at the individual level and at the level of the institution. Unlike the British government of the day whose approach was based on negative incentives – that is, good old-fashioned threats – their Dutch counterparts based their policy on the prospect of reward, though they too concentrated both on institutional leadership and on the academic Estate. However, unlocking the key elements to competition was not a unilateral action, as had largely been the case in Britain. There was an incentive and an incentive of a most substantial kind, namely the strengthening of institutional autonomy. And on this basis, the consensus between higher education and government was re-negotiated. It was, however, evident to all that such autonomy depended on individual universities adapting to a competitive environment and indeed was conferred largely on that understanding.

One may speculate why Dutch academia posed so little dissent to competition as an innovating principle. The obvious answer is that being given greater powers for self-management, though not necessarily self-governance on a fully collegial basis, was an acceptable trade-off in return for both competition and public scrutiny. Accepting the revised terms of the consensus also meant accepting one very powerful argument, which derived from it. Because the universities had been granted new and substantial responsibilities and taken them over from National Administration, they – for their part – should be ready regularly to report to the public on how they had fulfilled the expectations with which they had been entrusted. Clearly, public trust in academia had not been broken. On the contrary, it had been visibly strengthened. Evaluation in this setting was a public statement of that trust. And no-where was this more evident than the siting of the function of evaluation itself. By entrusting the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) with the task of Evaluation, the claim of academia to police its own house was recognised in full.

#### **14. Competition in the Political Mode: France.**

As we have seen, competition as the basis for evaluation has been a powerful argument in determining the conditions under which Evaluation is established and very often the policy style in which it develops. But not all countries, as we pointed out earlier, accord so wide a place to public competition. Nor do they necessarily regard the driving of higher education by market forces as either an indispensable still less as a desirable priority. Indeed, in certain highly regulated countries – and France is not untypical – there is a strong current of opinion which holds one of the major responsibilities of government is precisely to protect

its citizens – and – its higher education system by extension – from the distortions that an indiscriminant embrace of ‘market forces’ may have. In this perspective, the application of market forces and competition as their essence, is limited by two considerations, both of which are the prime responsibility of the State. These are the National Interest, however conceived and the threat of social unrest and its consequences for political disarray. These are not small !considerations and very certainly not when viewed through the telescope of the recent history of French higher education. In the past thirty years, the student Estate in France has on its battle honours the heads of one President – de Gaulle, one prime Minister, Alain Juppé in 1995 and at least one Secretary of State for Higher Education, Alain Devacquet in 1985.

Briefly stated, just as economic Liberalism looks askance at state regulation, so the countries of the ‘regulated order’ reciprocate. They look with measured coolness at ‘the market’. And, this means that the rhetoric, which accompanies the mobilisation of higher education and its evaluation, often takes strange and original forms. And from this it follows that the justification of Evaluation is couched somewhat differently.

### **15. Higher Education as a Public Service.**

In France, our point of departure is the basic legal definition of higher education as a public service. Historically, the notion underpinning such a concept was that across the Nation, universities ought to provide the same facilities and the same conditions for students irrespective of the region in which the individual university was located. Such a legal construct made for a powerful and detailed framework of central Ministry oversight, which surrounded and controlled universities in the most elaborate fashion. Universities provide a service to the Nation, which was defined, regulated and scrutinised by the Ministry. Universities in France, so official rhetoric would have it, do not compete for a market.

Nor, as far as student fees were concerned, was there much point in doing so. Student fees are of token amounts – no more than \$200 per annum. Thus, far more than most of its European counterparts, the French government found itself locked into a situation in which the need to improve the speed of responsiveness to economic change was no less pressing,, as too was the need to improve both student throughput, qualification rates and resource usage. However, whilst the needs were broadly similar, they summoned up a rather different rhetoric. This rhetoric in a curious manner, echoed the terminology that, in other countries, had been associated with an earlier period when higher education’s mission was to cater for social demand, rather than coming to grips with market forces. Evaluation was then justified in terms of avoiding wastage, particularly amongst first generation students, as a means of upholding equality of opportunity. Likewise efficiency which was cast in terms of improving the quality of public service and the Nation’s system of higher education.

Interestingly, this line of, persuasion did not exclude the notion of competition. Rather it assigned it to a different sphere. Competition was like the Scots witticism about water and whiskey. Water is not for internal consumption. Nor, for the French, was competition in higher education. However, improvement of the

quality of higher education as a public service was seen as a strategic imperative to raise the country's competitive stance on the world market. And Evaluation was a means to this end.

These differences mark France off from both Britain and the Netherlands. The rationale that accompanied the creation of the French Evaluation system was conceived within the rhetoric of national solidarity. By seating market competition as an external consideration whilst relying on co-operation as the internal driving force, the provocative act was deftly avoided. Such argumentation drew the teeth of public sector unions – always powerful in French political life – and very especially the teachers' unions which, if nothing else, had the potential effectively to veto policy that went against their interests.

But other considerations also shaped French rhetoric and very especially the siting and status of the National Evaluation Committee, the first of its type to be created in Europe. (Neave, 1996) Just as Britain broke the consensus between higher education and the State, the better to operationalise competition, and just as the Dutch forged consensus anew the price of which was that the universities accept competition as their part of the bargain, so the French authorities were engaged in a not dissimilar exercise. That exercise was to build trust between universities and government in order for the former to accept the additional responsibilities which followed from devolving some measure of power to the regions. There were other considerations besides this.

## 16. Changes: mental and otherwise.

If some budgetary responsibility for higher education were to be devolved to the regions, not only had the shackles of central control to be loosened. The mentality that had grown up around such a powerful frame – the tendency always to look to Paris before taking major decisions – had to be modified and radically so. In other words, if political decentralisation was to have any substance in higher education, universities had to have the capacity to handle those responsibilities central government offloaded onto them. Put succinctly, universities needed to develop the capacity for pro-active decision making, for taking initiatives on their own, rather than being reactive to the will of the Prince in Paris.

Considerations such as these placed a very different construction on the purpose of Evaluation in France. Its strategic purpose was not to impose yet another instrument to scrutinise institutional performance, output, efficiency and good husbandry. Presented in *such* terms, Evaluation would, more likely than not, have served merely to add to the Jurassic layers of centralised oversight. In its French conception, Evaluation had an additional role. Verification, so official argument ran, was not for the eyes of the Prince only. Certainly, it was destined for the public – in a two yearly Report to the Nation in the person of the President of the Republic. But Evaluation was above all for academia itself. Knowing how other universities had responded to the opportunities the loosening of central control provided was, so the official view argued, a powerful lever for self-improvement. And self-improvement was the prime lever for securing the improvement of higher education as a public service. In fine, Evaluation à *la française* more than most, placed

particular weight on evaluation as a pedagogic device. Knowledge of how other universities had faced up to the need to be more innovative ought to be a powerful inducement for others to follow, especially if they were successful. Emulation thus took the place of competition as the 'mobilising value'.

### **17. Self-Denying Ordinance.**

If we look at the French interpretation of Evaluation, its presentation may be seen as government engaged in building up the trust and, more to the point, the self-confidence of an academic Estate which, if national, had long remained in a condition of 'tutelage' to the Prince. Such an approach stood in marked contrast to what was happening beyond the Northern mists of the English Channel for the Prince in France was not seeking to assert his powers over academia, nor to bring it to heel. He was engaged in an undertaking, which in administrative history is rare above all others. He was embarked on a process which has precedent long ago in British political history and is known as a 'Self-Denying Ordinance' – that is, voluntarily setting limitations to his own power.<sup>2</sup> And, more to the point, seeking ways of encouraging academia to assume with efficiency those responsibilities he was only too pleased to release.

Such an overall strategy accounts for a number of features unique to the evaluation system in France. First, the National Evaluation Committee does not report to the Minister of Education – or Higher Education. These things change from time to time. Officially, it reports to the Head of State, to the President of the Republic in an official publication which sets out the state of French higher education and its activities over the previous two years. (Neave, 1996) In this way, the independence of the Committee from government is guaranteed. Second, Evaluation does not go below the level of the individual institution, although it conducts reviews of particular disciplines. (Starpoli, 1987) Third, Evaluation stoutly refuses to rank order universities. It does so on the grounds that rank order will detract from the basic purpose of Evaluation. This purpose, as I have pointed out earlier, is to provide information on grounded practices and ways by which innovation may be advanced. Precisely what innovation is relevant and appropriate depends on the situation of those referring to it, though clearly the dimensions and items to be evaluated are subject to a broadly standardised national frame.

### **18. Sweden: redefining the culture of evaluation.**

Finally, we turn our attention to Sweden, a country that has a long history of linking major changes in higher education policy to prior evaluation, going back over the past forty years. (Svensson, 1987) Sweden is noteworthy for the high degree of consensus politics (Anton, 1961) and shares with France that characteristic of a strong centrally defined framework in which higher education is set. (Neave & Jenkinson, 1983) Similar too, is the fact that higher education is viewed as a public service and that the basic purpose of Evaluation lies in its improvement rather than the rhetoric of ensuring value for money, often a sub theme

of the discourse in those systems shaped by economic liberalism. (Neave, 1991)

Over the past six to eight years, the higher education landscape in Sweden has changed considerably. To the, traditional seven universities a large number of University Colleges have been added. That higher education in Sweden is evolving rapidly towards a higher degree of institutional diversity has been a direct influence in shaping both the purposes and the *modus operandi* of the Evaluation system. One of the more interesting innovations in Swedish evaluation is the emphasis on the variety of provision and opportunity rather than stressing conformity and homogeneity which many observers have, hitherto noted in connection with higher education in that country. To the notion of equality – a central value in Swedish society – is now added the rider ‘Equal but different’.

Equally worth our attention is the push by the Swedish Higher Education Agency [Högskolverket] to redefine and broaden the usual definition of ‘evaluative culture’. The Swedish Higher Education Agency has responsibility for evaluating all sectors of higher education including the graduate level. In its usual meaning ‘evaluative culture’ applies mainly to those ‘evaluated’. It is presumed, of course, that ‘Evaluators’ by definition are already suitably versed in it! Thus, ‘creating an evaluative culture’ is held to be synonymous with making sure the ‘evaluated’ know the rules of the game and abide by them. It is a world narrowly defined involving on the one hand those ‘who sit in judgement’ – the agencies that carry out this function – and the ‘expert society’ of academia, its guardians and administrators on the other, who are ‘the judged’. (Scheele, Maassen & Westerheijden, 1998) Evaluation in such a setting is a closed cycle system. And whilst reports may be released for public perusal, it is rare indeed that the results of the evaluation are couched in terms that are immediately relevant to those outside the charmed circle.

Evaluation in Sweden however, in addition to enlightening academia about its current condition, is committed to extending the ‘evaluative culture’ into society at large. Specifically, this is done in two ways: first by including student representatives, graduate and undergraduate, in the review process from the very start; the second, the use of part of the data gathered from evaluating programmes to inform and guide students in their choice of institution or subject. Clearly, the Swedish concept of an ‘evaluative culture’ extends beyond the parties of judges and judged. This is an interesting variation for effectively, it reverses the relationship between evaluation and consensus-building we saw operating in France. There, evaluation was seen by government as a means of building consensus, the better to prepare academia for the more weighty responsibilities it was to assume. In Sweden, however, where consensus politics are the norm, the task the authorities set themselves was to incorporate the process of evaluation from its technical arcania into the procedures and patterns of public participation that were the essence of a long-established a consensus.;

## 19. Risks.

But the rhetoric of opening up the closed dialogue between ‘the judges’ and ‘the judged’ is not without

risk. The prime risk is, of course, that the academic interest may interpret democratic openness as an indirect expression of distrust and that the presence of outside interests is simply another, more subtle way for central administration to impose its views. Once again, the question of trust thrusts itself to the fore. (de Boer, 2002) But with this difference, distrust came not from government but from the academic Estate. Very particularly, such distrust sprang from the vexed and highly sensitive issue of who should 'own' knowledge, an issue made more sensitive by the policy of the Swedish National Higher Education Agency to use data derived from programme evaluation publicly to inform student choice. The delicacy of the situation explains in part the refusal of Swedish authorities formally to engage in institutional rank ordering on the basis of the evaluations undertaken, despite very considerable pressure to do so. This refusal, of course, Sweden shares with France. But in the Swedish case, the motives for so doing are very different. The concern of the central agency is to preserve the established consensus despite the railings of Academia, rather than, as in the French case, to construct a new form of consensus with the Academic Estate.

## 20. Conclusion.

In this presentation I have focused on the arguments, justifications and general context, political, historical and social which surround and accompany the development, of evaluation systems in Western Europe. I have done so by examining the development of Evaluation in four countries. These countries were Britain, the Netherlands, France and Sweden. In Britain and the Netherlands, the rhetoric of Evaluation was heavily influenced by the canons of liberal economics and by the social construct that follows from them – the reduction in the role of central administration and the centrality of the 'competitive ethic' as the mobilising agent. In France and Sweden, rhetoric took a very different form. I qualified this form as the 'political' model. There, the rhetoric of evaluation is set in a different context – that of devolving some of the functions of central administration to lower levels of decision making, a context in which change is presented within a political rhetoric rather than being urged on primarily by an economic rationale. Evaluation in this setting is concerned first and foremost with improving the quality of higher education viewed as a public service rather than as the handmaiden to the productive process.

Despite these contextual and very substantial differences, it remains a fact that evaluation today is grounded in permanent system of regular verification, monitoring and assessment of institutional performance. But evaluation systems are not independent of what a government's intentions are, nor from what its policy is. On the contrary, they form the All-Seeing Eye of the Prince. Evaluation may naturally be viewed and presented in terms of its procedures, instruments, ways of working. It is not, however, a neutral process and its rhetoric, as we have seen, is largely determined by the purpose of governments and the will of the Prince. These purposes and goals are not only very different. They may also be realised in very different 'policy' styles – by punitive action, by associating evaluation with incentives – to have greater control over one's house, as we saw in the case of the Netherlands – by using evaluation as lever to change

mentalities in academia and to lure it to take over new responsibilities, as we saw in the case of France. Different strategies then summon up a different rhetoric.

As I pointed out at the start of this presentation, an analysis based on comparing the technical aspects of evaluation systems might lead us to conclude that, in Europe at least, convergence, shared and common ways of doing things, is far advanced. If, however, we turn to the dimension of rhetoric as our analytical focus, our conclusion might drive us in just the opposite direction. Thus, the questions that arise from rhetoric, policy and implementation, which we have explored in relation to Evaluation, raise fundamental issues in other domains of comparative policy. Which is the better way to tackle such a *problematique* is largely a matter, I suspect, of personal conviction and inclination.

Let me leave you with one final thought. Yesterday, I visited Kamakura, guided and accompanied by three delightful young people who are amongst Professor Kameko's doctoral students. At one point in this memorable day, I found myself at the entry to the Temple. On either side of the entrance glowered two ferocious, scowling and most severe figures. They seemed to be judges and appeared, at least to me, not to be especially pleased with what they saw. Guardians, they were – that most certainly. They were, I have to confess, very different from the figures I am used to.

Still, one thought struck me. For those things we hold most valuable – sacred even – we always protect with guardians. True, how they protect what we value – and from what – may differ. They may differ too in the rewards and the punishments they give out either to the dissolute or to those who fear the gods. Or, who fear – perhaps rightly – the Ministry of Finance.

But – and this is my parting thought – might it not be that Evaluation systems are our present day equivalents that is, Guardians to the Temple of Higher Learning?

#### Notes.

- 1 In some countries the possession of a secondary high school leaving certificate conferred the constitutional right to a place in higher education e.g. France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Austria.
- 2 An excellent expression of this process is to be seen in the relationship between Central State and regions which, under the 1989 Higher Education Guideline Law (Loi d'Orientation) was couched in terms of a 'partenariat' – that is a relationship on the footing of equality rather than one of hierarchical subordination.

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