

TECHNOPOLIS



Evaluation at RCN

Background report No 14 in the evaluation of the
Research Council of Norway

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Reports in the evaluation of the Research Council of Norway

Synthesis report

Erik Arnold, Stefan Kuhlman and Barend van der Meulen, **A Singular Council? Evaluation of the Research Council of Norway**, Brighton: Technopolis, 2001

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1 Introduction

This background report to the evaluation of RCN explores the council's use of evaluation, as part of the systematic management of the knowledge production systems and in its own activities. Our original expectation, expressed in our proposal to KUF, was that the existing body of evaluations would shed light on RCN's own performance. This proved only in a limited way to be the case, so we transferred resources from the work steps concerned with looking backwards at RCN's evaluations to cope with the interview load in the evaluation. Progress discussions with KUF indicated a need to undertake many more general background interviews than we had originally planned. In this report, therefore, we focus on the role of evaluation in RCN's practice¹. The empirical basis for our observations in this document is: interviews with the strategy function and others in RCN; parts of discussions with researchers, especially institute directors, about the usefulness of evaluations; NIFU's meta-evaluations and a reading of a selection of evaluations.

2 Evaluation Activities

RCN's statutes say that the council has to "initiate and follow up evaluations of research and research-performing institutions" (Article 2). To this end, the Executive Board decided in 1993 to delegate responsibility for disciplinary evaluation to the division boards. In practice, the Industry and Energy division has also taken over the evaluation of the effects of its actions on the national innovation system.

The Strategy division retains a co-ordinating responsibility for evaluation, to which it devotes half of the time of one individual. It published an evaluation handbook for the council in 1995 and produced two successive generations of an evaluation strategy for the council, in 1996 and 2001.² The council as a whole does not have an evaluation budget. The individual divisions determine their own evaluation strategies and spending. In the context of a decentralised evaluation policy, the Strategy division has sometimes struggled to get a complete overview of the activity, and was not able to provide us with a complete list or set of evaluations, though most of the evaluation outputs are likely to have been captured centrally. A project has now been proposed which would maintain an analytical database of RCN's evaluations. There is no organised, systematic use of evaluations for learning within

¹ RCN is sometimes used as an external contract manager for large evaluations needed by individual ministries. Examples include a real-time evaluation of higher education reforms and evaluation of cash support to families (*kontantstøtteordningen*). These are excluded from our discussion here.

² This is formally outside our mandate, but the strategy was published in March and reflects thinking and action over the previous five years, as well as the previous handbook

RCN or the communities evaluated, except in the case of the new discipline evaluations, where a process has been defined for the benefit of those evaluated.

Between 1995 and 1999, RCN's spend on evaluation appears to have varied between 2 and 10 MNOK, which corresponds at the highest to a third of one percent of its research budget. In addition, the Industry and Energy division contracts out a significant amount of work to monitor the effects of its user-directed R&D on companies and to try to estimate the economic effects of this investment.

Exhibit 1 Evaluations Completed per Year

Category	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Institutes, Centres, etc	4	1	6 (9)	7 (25)	3
Programmes etc	9	13	9	2	3 (5)
Disciplines	0	0	1	1	0
Other	0	2	2	5	2
Total number	13	16	18 (21)	15 (33)	8 (10)
Total cost MNOK	2	4	7	10	3

Source: RCN

The extent to which there is an evaluation strategy and calendar varies among the divisions. While the centre occasionally arranges 'strategic' evaluations (such as meta-evaluation of RCN's evaluations in general, and separately a specific analysis of its research institute evaluations), most RCN evaluations are commissioned by the divisions. These range from peer review evaluations covering the performance of individual fields of basic science in Norway to customer surveys and economic impact evaluations of individual R&D/Innovation programmes.

The industry ministry's evaluation of user-directed R&D has been followed up annually by the same evaluation team, now working under contract to RCN's IE division. This has helped create a large data set relevant for evaluation and has enabled some incremental methods development. The division has chosen to invest substantial resources in standardising its appraisal criteria and in trying to determine the financial return on its investments in user-directed R&D. IE is now developing a computer-based appraisal system for proposals, and is investing the resources it would otherwise have spent on evaluation in implementing this. As a result, with the exception of some smaller programmes aimed at SME development, IE programmes do not tend individually to be evaluated.

RCN has two major, cyclical evaluation processes in place. One is a six-year cycle of evaluation for the institutes under its tutelage. These are evaluated in groups by peer review, accompanied by user surveys. The institute evaluations appear to have some use for the institutes concerned, but do not feed back to resource allocation or to other aspects of RCN's strategic responsibility for the research institutes.

The other major evaluation cycle involves disciplinary evaluations and is managed by the NT division. This is a process that has started within the past 3 years. So far, NT has organised disciplinary evaluations for chemistry, earth science, physics, and biology and biochemistry. The reviews are done by international disciplinary panels. The division board decides who is to be evaluated, the mandate of the committee and its scope. In the case of biology, BF, MU and MH were consulted and co-operated.

The mandate is more or less the same for every committee. When the disciplinary review has been published, the research council sets up a Planning Committee with members from the institutions that were evaluated. Representatives from the council attend the meetings, but not as members. Our interviews suggest that the discipline evaluations have won a measure of respect in the research and policy communities.

Outside these two major evaluation cycles and IE's surveys relating to user-directed R&D projects, it is hard to detect a pattern in the evaluations.

RCN has co-operated with SND to develop and extend the innovation evaluation community in Norway, via an annual 'EVA' evaluation seminar series. There is not any systematic evaluation training for RCN staff.

3 Meta-evaluations

RCN has commissioned two meta-evaluations from NIFU.

In 1995, RCN asked NIFU to look at a fairly wide sample of evaluations (30 were examined). NIFU found quite large diversity in the issues tackled in the evaluations, much of which is dictated by the diversity of objectives in RCN-funded work. Most aim to be formative. Very few try to tackle outcomes or impacts of the research being evaluated. Setting evaluation mandates had been delegated down to the divisions or lower levels in RCN, so these were disparate and generally under-specified. (In our view, this is what one would expect in a decentralised evaluation regime. The problem can be remedied through clearer principles for standardisation, making an evaluation 'coach' available in-house, and by providing basic training to those who write evaluation terms of reference. The European Commission has adopted these tactics in recent years.) According to those commissioning them, the commonest use of evaluations was legitimisation. The most likely recommendations to be adopted were those relating to administration.

In strong contrast to the positive picture painted by NIFU's internal respondents, those who had been evaluated were scathing in their criticism of RCN's apparent failure to make any use of the evaluations. We have the same picture from our own interviews. NIFU's overall conclusion was that, while the evaluations generally were of good quality, RCN did not use them to their full potential. NIFU recommended a series of measures for improving evaluation practice, most of which in effect involve a more professional (and therefore educated) approach to evaluation. About one quarter of the recommendations relate to ways to improve adoption and implementation of evaluation results. From our observations within RCN, efforts have been made at a central level to improve methods and comparability, for example through the development of an evaluation handbook and evaluation strategies. However, the continued decentralisation of responsibility works counter to the effective implementation of NIFU's – in themselves, professional and correct – recommendations.

Brofoss and Langfeldt wrote a meta-evaluation³ of RCN's institute evaluations in 1999. The evaluations tackle both management and research. They are undertaken

³ Karl Erik Brofoss og Liv Langfeldt, *Forskningsrådets instituttevalueringer, 1995-1999*, U-notat 5/99, Oslo: NIFU, 1999

by foreign peer reviewers, backed up with surveys of users. RCN's internal project to systematise research institute funding rules and performance indicators seemed to have had a useful effect on improving the quality and – especially – the comparability of evaluations. Nonetheless, the differences among evaluators and their use of evaluation criteria were so great that it was safe only to make comparisons among institutes evaluated in parallel by the same group of evaluators.

4 Conclusions

In our view, the evaluation process in RCN is overly decentralised, and this makes it less useful than it should be, both for informing policy and for learning within RCN and the research-performing community. Divisional managers should be involved in, but not in control of, contracting with evaluators, otherwise the evaluators effectively have to work for those they evaluate. Equally, it becomes easier to choose 'friendly' evaluators or those known to be likely to lobby for certain outcomes. A greater degree of centralisation is also needed to maintain even quality standards and consistent issue coverage, as well as to protect the council's reputation for transparency and objectivity. RCN could also usefully consider establishing an overall evaluation budget, since programme management typically does not prioritise evaluation activities.

With some exceptions, the evaluation activity of RCN appears to have few consequences and to contribute little to learning. This is partly a result of RCN's comparative powerlessness in matters such as deciding the core funding of certain institutes. Equally, however, mechanisms for organisational learning (such as using evaluation experiences in design reviews of proposed new programmes) have not been put in place.

The council's overall spend on evaluation is very low, compared with the informal OECD norm of 1-2% of research budgets, and appears overly focused on peer review. As elsewhere, there is a trend from individual programme and institute evaluation towards evaluating larger entities such as disciplines, groups of institutes and policies. At these higher levels, peer review becomes less appropriate and reliable, and needs to be supplemented with (or substituted by) other techniques.⁴ Like all other research evaluation techniques, peer review is, in any case, not without methodological problems. RCN's frequent practice of using foreign but Nordic peers requires consideration. The Nordic research community is small and already highly networked, so that it is for many purposes hard to regard it as 'international.' The focus on the Nordic also excludes wider international perspectives. For these reasons, research funders in Sweden and Finland are increasingly reaching beyond the Nordic area for evaluators, and are doing a growing proportion of their evaluation (and proposal assessment) work in English.

⁴ see Erik Arnold, 'Research evaluation: A systems world needs systems evaluations,' *EVA seminar, September 2001*, Forskningsrådet: 2001 (forthcoming)