# Chapter 3
# Investigating Assessment Standards in the Netherlands, Italy, and the United Kingdom:
## Challenges for Responsible Research Evaluation

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## ABSTRACT

*The following contribution asks which role standards for research information play in practices of responsible research evaluation. The authors develop the notion of assessment standards against the background of functional standard classifications. The development of semantic and procedural assessment standards in the national research evaluation exercises of the Netherlands, Great Britain, and Italy are investigated using a qualitative case study design. A central finding of the study is that assessment standards incorporate conflicting values. A continuous tradeoff between the transparency of evaluation procedures and provided information as well as the variety of research outputs is being counterbalanced in all countries by compensating a higher level of semantic standardization with lower degrees of procedural standardization.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Research organizations, research groups and individual researchers are regularly subject to ex ante and ex post assessments of research quality in multiple contexts, such as the evaluation of grant proposals, scientific publications and in hiring or tenure processes (Butler, 2007). In many countries, institutional funding of research depends on performance-based research funding systems (Hicks, 2012; Lepori, Reale, & Spinello, 2018). Some of these systems make use of comprehensive national evaluation schemes, such as the "Research Excellence Framework" (REF) in the United Kingdom and the "Quality of Research Evaluation" (VQR) in Italy (Rebora & Turri, 2013). In other countries, standardized national evaluation systems are in place that are not tied to resource allocation but used for quality control in a context of organizational learning, as is the case for the Dutch "Standard Evaluation Protocol" (SEP) (van der Meulen, 2007)

Assessment activities comprise the use of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, such as peer review and bibliometric indicators, respectively (Moed & Halevi, 2015). Bibliometrics is "the field of science that deals with the development and application of quantitative measures and indicators for science and technology, based on bibliographic information" (van Leeuwen, 2004, p. 374). A branch of this field, "evaluative bibliometrics" (Narin, 1976), focuses on the evaluation of scientific activities by means of output and impact measurement (van Leeuwen, 2004).

Although peer review is considered to be the most viable method to assessing scientific quality, it has been subject to criticism pertaining to its lack of fairness, reliability and structural conservatism (Hansson, 2010; Reinhart, 2012). In the face of the complexity and scale of national evaluations, bibliometrics are supposed to deliver cost-effective, large-scale and often deemed more objective alternatives to peer review (Butler, 2007; Gläser & Laudel, 2007).

In the wake of the proliferation of quantitative research assessment, prominent initiatives (Cagan, 2013; Hicks, Wouters, Waltman, Rijcke, & Rafols, 2015; Wilsdon et al., 2015) call for an increased focus on practices of responsible research evaluation. These focus on producing research metrics or indicators that adhere to certain principles such as transparency and diversity.

The quality of research metrics notably depends on the quality of information and data that are being used as well as their collection and handling (Biesenbender, 2019). Data about research activity in general are called research information (RI). RI comprises information on a research institution's (scientific) staff and structure, projects, third-party funding, publications, patents etc. Research assessment processes and their outcomes depend not only on the type of information being used but also on the way the information is being processed, aggregated and compared. In the responsible research evaluation discourse, standardization of processes of RI data

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