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*Special Issue: Self-assessment in Postgraduate Programs in Education: possibilities, challenges, and tensions*

# Self-evaluation of postgraduate studies: What does international experience teach us?*

# Autoavaliação da pós-graduação: o que a experiência internacional nos ensina?

# Autoevaluación de posgrado: ¿qué nos enseña la experiencia internacional?

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**Abstract:** This article presents the results of a study on postgraduate evaluation policies adopted by Brazil and the Netherlands. Its main purpose was to understand how the Brazilian and Dutch systems conceive and carry out self-evaluation in their postgraduate programs. Methodologically, it is a comparative study conducted in Brazil and at Leiden University between 2021 and 2022. The research revealed that the Brazilian model is top-down, centripetal, centralized, and oriented toward promoting greater internal homogenization and less differentiation. Evaluation is predominantly external, normative, regulatory, and performance-based. The Dutch system, on the other hand, is bottom-up, decentralized, and internationally recognized for its systematic and institutionalized use of self-evaluation. Based on the research findings, the article presents a set of proposals aimed at strengthening self-evaluation and improving the Brazilian postgraduate evaluation system.
**Keywords:** Postgraduate studies. Evaluation policies. Self-evaluation.

**Resumo:** Este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma pesquisa sobre as políticas de avaliação da pós-graduação adotadas pelo Brasil e pelos Países Baixos. Seu propósito principal foi compreender como os sistemas brasileiro e holandês concebem e realizam a autoavaliação em seus Programas de Pós-Graduação. Trata-se, em seus aspectos metodológicos, de um estudo comparado, desenvolvido no Brasil e na Universidade de Leiden no período entre 2021 e 2022. A pesquisa evidenciou que o modelo brasileiro é *top-down*, centrípeto, centralizado e orientado a promover maior homogeneização interna e menor diferenciação. A avaliação é predominantemente externa, normativa, regulatória e baseada no desempenho. O sistema holandês é, por sua vez, *bottom-up*, descentralizado e reconhecido internacionalmente pelo uso sistemático e institucionalizado de autoavaliação. Com base nos resultados da pesquisa, o artigo apresenta um conjunto

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de proposições que visam fortalecer a autoavaliação e aprimorar o sistema brasileiro de avaliação da pós-graduação.
**Palavras-chave:** Pós-graduação. Políticas de avaliação. Autoavaliação.

**Resumen:** Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación sobre las políticas de evaluación de posgrado adoptadas por Brasil y los Países Bajos. Su objetivo principal fue comprender cómo los sistemas brasileño y neerlandés conciben y aplican la autoevaluación en sus programas de posgrado. Metodológicamente, se trata de un estudio comparado desarrollado en Brasil y en la Universidad de Leiden entre 2021 y 2022. La investigación evidenció que el modelo brasileño es *top-down*, centrípeto, centralizado y orientado a promover una mayor homogeneización interna y menor diferenciación. La evaluación es predominantemente externa, normativa, reguladora y basada en el desempeño. El sistema neerlandés, en cambio, es *bottom-up*, descentralizado y reconocido internacionalmente por el uso sistemático e institucionalizado de la autoevaluación. A partir de los resultados, el artículo presenta un conjunto de propuestas destinadas a fortalecer la autoevaluación y mejorar el sistema brasileño de evaluación de posgrado.
**Palabras clave:** Postgrado. Políticas de evaluación. Autoevaluación.

## Introduction

*The Brazilian postgraduate experience recently is the most positive thing in the history of higher education in Brazil and is also the one that must be taken seriously.*
(Darcy Ribeiro)

*Practicing what you preach and promise*.
(Center for Science and Technology Studies, Leiden University)

Brazilian postgraduate education (PG) is internationally recognized for its quality. The current PG system is one of the most robust and sophisticated in the world. Over the decades, improvements have been introduced that promote high standards of stability, organization, and transparency (Balbachevsky, 2005; Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel [CAPES], 2018; Martins, 2018; Saviani, 2000, 2003, 2020; Verhine & Dantas, 2009). As Martins (2018, p. 24) points out, PG has established itself as "the most successful dimension of the country's education system." Unlike in most other countries, all master's and doctoral courses in Brazil are part of a centralized, comparative, performance-based system that aims to promote greater internal homogeneity and less differentiation. As the literature on the subject highlights, the National Postgraduate System (NPGS) is organized, regulated, and reproduced from the top down and from the whole to the parts. Given these characteristics, the NPGS can be defined as a top-down system (Brazil, Trevisol, & Drooge, 2022; Martins, 2018; Saviani, 2000, 2003, 2020; Trevisol & Brazil, 2023; Verhine, 2008; Verhine & Freitas, 2012).

Evaluation and funding are central to the system. The interaction between these two dimensions has directly improved the quality of courses and advanced research in the country. Postgraduate (PG) education accounts for approximately 95% of Brazilian scientific production (Balbachevsky, 2005; Brazil, 2020; Capes, 2018, 2020; Verhine & Dantas, 2009). According to Clarivate's 2024 report, *Overview of Changes in Research in Brazil* in the past five years (2019–2023), Brazil published an average of 91,600 articles per year, for a total of around 458,370 articles. Brazil's position between 13th and 14th place in the global scientific production ranking is largely due to PG. As Martins (2018) points out, PG has contributed to the modernization of higher education and the institutionalization of research within higher education institutions (HEIs). According to

Martins (2018), PG has established itself as "the most successful dimension of the Brazilian education system" (p. 24).

The undeniable success of the NPGS is part of an ongoing process of evaluating and improving PG policies. The NPGS did not emerge fully formed. The changes and improvements introduced over the last 60 years have defined the current format, characteristics, and specifics of the NPGS. Understanding the historical context helps us identify what has been incorporated and improved over time, as well as what has been neglected, forgotten, or rejected. It is as important to identify what is absent as it is to identify what is present. It is relevant to ask why certain aspects or dimensions took so long to be included or were never incorporated. In this sense, diagnosing absences is as important as diagnosing emergencies. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2004) proposed, understanding social and political reality requires a dual exercise in interpretation that he calls "sociology of absences" and "sociology of emergencies" (p. 799).

Inspired by the dual exercise of interpretation proposed above, an analysis was conducted on Brazilian PG evaluation policies implemented over the last 60 years, especially since 1975, when the first course quality assessment data collection was carried out (Viana, 2018) and finished the following year (Siqueira, 2019). Through analyzing absences and emergencies, we identified the advances and improvements introduced over time, as well as the dimensions the evaluation system neglected or included only partially. Regarding absences, the documentary research revealed the fragile presence of self-assessment (SA) in PG policies over the decades. This finding raises several questions: (1) Why did evaluation policies take so long to recognize SA's potential? (2) How does this relate to Brazil's top-down evaluation model?, and (3) What weaknesses did the absence of SA introduce into the NPGS?

The first Capes document to clearly recognize the importance and necessity of AA in PG was recently approved by the Superior Council in 2018 under the title "Proposal for Improvement of the PG Evaluation Model": Final Document of the National Commission for Monitoring the NPGP 2011-2020" (October 10, 2018) (Capes, 2018). The document acknowledged that this absence weakened institutional planning and made evaluation processes too vertical, quantitative, and disconnected from the various Postgraduate Program (PGP) vocations. A diagnosis carried out between 2017 and 2018 revealed that "the current evaluation system has reached a point of exhaustion and must be rethought and improved conceptually and objectively" (Capes, 2018, p. 3). The final document indicated at least ten areas from which changes and improvements to the evaluation system should be designed and implemented. Quality assurance (QA) (Axis 1) was recommended as a permanent action that should be institutionalized within higher education institutions (HEIs).

Given the incipient culture of QA in the NPGS, the recent emergence of the topic introduces dimensions that challenge HEIs and PGPs as a whole. In particular, HEIs have been challenged to: (i) develop institutional planning for PG; (ii) design and approve institutional QA policies integrated into other institutional evaluation processes; (iii) define the objectives, procedures, and main results of the self-evaluation process with PG programs; and (iv) design QA from a multidimensional perspective. Implementation has required significant changes in institutional policies for PG.

In addition to institutional challenges, the emergence of this topic has presented researchers conducting studies on evaluation with theoretical, analytical, and methodological challenges. Scientific production on this subject is essential, particularly given the current context of institutional affirmative action (AA) policy formulation and implementation. These reasons motivated the development of this comparative study. Comparative studies provide insights that allow us to understand topics from rarely observed perspectives and angles. They encourage views

that move simultaneously from "inside to outside" and "outside to inside," offering interpretations that transcend our daily space/time. As with different images projected onto the same mirror, comparison provides parameters for understanding specificities. They broaden our perception of reality and encourage a hermeneutics of suspicion. The knowledge gained is, in a sense, self-knowledge. Understanding the similarities, differences, and specificities of compared themes or objects is driven by the interest and need to discern the analyzed reality's positive and negative aspects, virtues, limitations, advantages, and disadvantages.

The research was conducted in two countries with very different approaches to GP: Brazil and the Netherlands. The Brazilian model was contrasted with an internationally recognized model that is known for its systematic and institutionalized use of AA. Over the decades, the Dutch model has inspired institutions in several countries, including Brazil. The country also stands out for its use of the U-Multirank model, a methodology developed in 2014 by the Center for Higher Education in Gütersloh, Germany, and the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente, Netherlands. Currently, the model is used by universities in 96 countries. The Netherlands adopts a bottom-up, decentralized model based on the principle that evaluations should be based on the mission, goals, and strategies established by the evaluated units. AA is the backbone of the evaluation process. Despite being a significantly smaller country than Brazil—with a territory and population corresponding to approximately 0.48% and 8%, respectively—the Netherlands currently ranks 14th in the world in scientific production (Clarivate, 2024). In-person research was conducted at the Center for Science and Technology Studies (CWTS) at Leiden University in the Netherlands between 2021 and 2022.

This article presents a summary of the main results of the research. More specifically, the text aims to (i) present the main characteristics and specificities of the Brazilian (top-down) and Dutch (bottom-up) evaluation models; (ii) analyze the role and importance that top-down and bottom-up systems attribute to self-evaluation; (iii) identify the main weaknesses and limitations that arise from the absence of AA in the PG; and (iv) present the main lessons that the Dutch model offers to countries such as Brazil, which are gradually adopting more hybrid formats based on a balance between internal and external evaluation.

## The top-down and bottom-up evaluation models

For the purposes of this article, detailing the characteristics and specifics of top-down and bottom-up models is important for understanding the topic. These models, although not the only ones, result from two very different conceptions of evaluation and university autonomy whose origins date back to the thirteenth century. According to Amaral (2009), Cobban (2017), and Vught (1995), European universities established under French influence viewed evaluation as a form of accountability to higher external authorities, typically associated with the Catholic Church, responsible for granting the right to teach (*licentia ubique docendi*). In contrast, universities in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, created under English influence, were characterized by self-government. They enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. Evaluation was carried out by peers. Collegiate bodies were entitled to evaluate and replace colleagues when necessary (Amaral, 2009).

Based on the international literature on the subject, particularly the works of Brasil, Trevisol, and Drooge (2022); Capano (2010); Drooge et al. (2013); Hicks (2012); Leeuw and Furubo (2008); Lepori, Reale, and Spinello (2018); Molas-Gallart (2012); Molas-Gallart and Davies (2016); Morriello (2019); Ochsner et al. (2020); Ochsner et al. (2020); Ochsner, Kulczycki, and Gedutis (2018), and Verhine and Freitas (2012) — the above principles and assumptions continue to inspire evaluation policies in many countries.

Countries that follow the top-down approach have systems that are heavily based on external evaluations carried out periodically by public or private regulatory, evaluation, and/or financing agencies. In these countries, research and R&D evaluation is centralized, standardized, and performance-based. Indicators are generally used to calculate and define the distribution of budgetary resources. This link has given rise to a performance-based financing system, as described in the literature (Hicks, 2012; Molas-Gallart, 2012; Ochsner, Kulczycki, & Gedutis, 2018).

**Chart 1** – Main characteristics and specificities of top-down and bottom-up PG assessment models

| Items | Brazil | Netherlands |
|---|---|---|
| Dimensions | In 2023, Brazil had 2,580 HEIs, of which 316 were public (about 12%) and 2,264 were private (about 88%). Private HEIs accounted for about 79% of total undergraduate enrollments, corresponding to 9,976,782 students (Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research [Inep], 2024). Unlike undergraduate programs, public HEIs (federal, state, and municipal) offer about 83% of PGPs (Carvalho, 2024a, 2024b). In 2023, the NPGS consisted of 7,105 master's and doctoral programs and approximately 428,598 students enrolled in 425 institutions in the five regions of the country (Capes, 2021, 2024; Carvalho, 2025). In the past five years (2019-2023), Brazil published 458,370 articles. In 2023, the country ranked 13th in the world production ranking (Clarivate, 2024). | The Dutch university system is significantly smaller than the Brazilian one. The country has 14 research universities (known as Universiteiten-WO), four small special universities, 43 universities of applied sciences (known as Hogescholen-HBO) and one Open University (Open University) (Drooge, 2021a; Vereniging Van Universiteiten [VSNU], 2022). Unlike in Brazil, Master's courses are part of the structure of the graduate course training process. Doctorates are closely linked to research. In the past five years (2019-2023), the country published around 372,000 articles, placing it 14th in the world scientific production ranking (Clarivate, 2024). |
| Institutional design | It is a top-down, centripetal, centralized, comparative system based on performance and geared toward promoting greater internal homogenization and less differentiation. Centralization stems from the leading role that the Brazilian government has played since 1965 in the formulation, coordination, evaluation, and financing of PG policies (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025; Cury, 2005; Martins, 2009; Trevisol, 2025; Verhine; Freitas, 2012). | It is a bottom-up, decentralized, heterogeneous model aimed at promoting greater differentiation and less homogenization. Evaluation is a dimension of institutional planning. Internal (self-) evaluation is the backbone. One of the central principles guiding the entire process is: "practice and assess what you preach and promise" (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025; Drooge et al., 2013; CWTS, 2022; Weert; Boezerooy, 2007). |
| Regulatory frameworks | The regulatory framework is established at the national level, under the coordination of a federal public agency linked to the Ministry of Education (MEC), called Capes. Between 1965 and 2025, at least ten important PG policies were approved: Opinion of the Federal Council of Education (CFE) No. 977, of December 3, 1965; CFE Opinion No. 77/1969; Decree No. 73,411, of January 4, 1974; I National Postgraduate Plan – PNPG (1975-1979), II NPGP (1982-1985), III NPGP (1986-1989), IV NPGP (1990-2004), V NPGP (2005-2010), VI NPGP (2011-2020), and VII NPGP (2025-2029). Based on these documents, the National Education Council (CNE), the Ministry of Education (MEC) and the Federal Coordination and Improvement of Postgraduate Studies (Capes) have published complementary | Policies are not defined by the government, funding agencies, or private organizations. They are drawn up by the three most important academic and scientific associations in the country. The VSNU, the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO) [corresponding to the Dutch Research Council] and the Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (KNAW) [Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences] are autonomous entities independent of the government, representing HEIs and the scientific community. Over the last four decades (1982-2022), eight important regulatory milestones have been published: Conditional Financing (1982); Higher Education and Research Act (1992); Protocol (1993-1998); Protocol (1998-2003); Strategy Evaluation Protocol – SEP (2003-2009); SEP |

| Items | Brazil | Netherlands |
|---|---|---|
| | normative acts (decrees, ordinances, etc.) with the purpose of establishing the competencies, duties, and responsibilities for all institutions that are part of the NPGS (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025; Trevisol, 2025; Viana, 2018). | (2009-2015); SEP (2015-2021); and SEP (2021-2026). The editions of the SEP, published every six years, establish the guidelines to be observed by all institutions (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025; Brazil; Trevisol; Drooge, 2022; Drooge et al., 2013). The protocols define guidelines at the national level, but HEIs have the autonomy to reorganize them. |
| Autonomy of HEIs | The regulatory frameworks defined at the national level delimit the autonomy of HEIs regarding the creation and implementation of new courses. Only courses recommended (accreditation) by Capes and recognized by CNE can be implemented (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025; Trevisol, 2025; Verhine, 2008; Verhine; Freitas, 2012). | Based on regulatory frameworks established at the national level (Strategy Evaluation Protocol) and by the European Union (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System), HEIs enjoy autonomy to create and implement Master's and Doctorate programs (Brazil; Trevisol; Drooge, 2022; Drooge et al., 2013). |
| Objectives of the assessment | The evaluation aims to ascertain whether courses meet the quality standards required at the national level. It is a performance-based system. Through the evaluation, the Brazilian government: (i) evaluates the performance of institutions and courses; (ii) monitors quality at the national level; (iii) establishes rankings and comparisons; (iv) evaluates the effectiveness and results of the policies implemented; and (v) establishes improvements in the system (Dias Sobrinho, 2003; Verhine, 2008; Verhine; Freitas, 2012). The scores, assigned on a scale of 1 to 7, determine admission (accreditation) and continued participation in courses in the NPGS, establish rankings and comparisons between courses and areas, and provide indicators (criteria) for the distribution of rewards and awards, especially scholarships and financial resources (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025; Trevisol, 2025). | This is an internal, procedural, and participatory practice based on the identity, objectives, and strategies of each unit evaluated. The main purpose of the evaluation is to improve quality, enhance societal relevance, increase transparency, and propose improvements (Brennan; Shah, 2000; Drooge, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d; VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020; Vught; Westerheijden, 2012; Weert; Boezerooy, 2007). The evaluation is based on performance, but does not assign grades or establish rankings or comparisons between courses, areas, and HEIs. There are no nationally defined rules regarding the consequences of the evaluation results. There is no direct correlation between the evaluation results and funding. |
| Entity responsible for the assessment | In Brazil, there is a federal public agency responsible for evaluating and financing PG. Macro coordination is carried out by Capes. | In the Netherlands, there is no national institution responsible for designing, organizing, and conducting evaluation, nor for applying rewards and sanctions. The institutions and units being evaluated are responsible for planning and executing all stages and requirements established by national protocols and internal evaluation policies (Drooge et al., 2013). |
| Internal and external evaluation | The evaluation is essentially external, conducted independently and impartially by experts and ad hoc consultants from the 50 areas of knowledge (informed peer review). The rules, organization, and procedures of the evaluation are defined through a complex system of cooperation and division of responsibilities between Capes and the scientific community. AA is a recent practice | The evaluation is essentially internal. Through the Terms of Reference, HEIs define the responsibilities, procedures, and deadlines for the evaluation process (Drooge et al., 2013; VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020). External evaluation takes place at a later stage. It is conducted by external experts, preferably from abroad. The evaluation combines quantitative and qualitative criteria. |

| Items | Brazil | Netherlands |
|---|---|---|
| | with little weight in external evaluation (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025; Trevisol, 2025). | |
| Ex ante and ex post evaluation | Both ex ante (accreditation) and ex post (continuity) evaluations are mandatory. Only courses that meet minimum quality standards may be implemented and/or maintained. | Institutions and units are responsible for both ex ante and ex post evaluation (Drooge, 2021b; VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020). |
| Evaluation cycle | Periodic and permanence (ex post) evaluations have been conducted since 1976. The current cycle is four years. The analysis of proposals for the creation of new courses (ex ante) is carried out throughout the year, according to a schedule defined at the national level. | The evaluation has been conducted since 1982 (Weert; Boezerooy, 2007). The current evaluation cycle is six years. |
| Level | The evaluation is national, based on common criteria defined nationally by the 50 evaluation areas of Capes. All PGPs are evaluated according to a single national calendar. | The evaluation is institutional, normally developed through eight stages: (i) definition of the unit's strategies, objectives, and goals; (ii) preparation of the Terms of Reference for the evaluation; (iii) preparation of the AA Report by the evaluated unit; (iv) selection and appointment of the members of the external evaluation committee; (v) visit by the external committee; (vi) preparation of the final report of the external committee; (vii) publication of the final evaluation opinion; (viii) discussion of the results and follow-up. There is no single nationally defined schedule (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025). |
| Assessment units | Courses are the units of assessment. The criteria vary partially according to the academic degree and the nature of the courses (Academic Master's, Professional Master's, Academic Doctorate, and Professional Doctorate). | In the Netherlands, the evaluation units are not PGP courses. They are, in general, research centers. Doctoral courses are usually linked to a research center. The protocols do not establish a separation between research and graduate programs. Master's courses, in turn, are evaluated using specific protocols based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. Master's degrees are part of the curriculum structure of graduate courses (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025; Trevisol, Brazil, 2023). |
| *Benchmarking* | The evaluation is measured using a scale of 1 to 7. The scores allow comparisons between courses, institutions, regions, and areas. | The inclusion of a benchmark is a decision that is up to the units. The evaluation, in general, does not generate indicators that allow comparisons between courses at the national level (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025). |
| Evaluation and financing | Evaluation and funding are the central pillars of the NPGS. The results of evaluations have repercussions. They are used to calculate the distribution of financial resources (grants, funding, and infrastructure). | Evaluation and funding are distinct dimensions. The results of evaluation do not generate data that the government and agencies can use to calculate the distribution of grants and funding for costs and infrastructure (Drooge et al., 2013; Estrela; Simão, 2003; Verhine; Freitas, 2012; VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020). |

| Items | Brazil | Netherlands |
|---|---|---|
| Visit in loco | It is carried out on an exceptional basis, only when recommended by higher authorities (Area Coordinators, Technical-Scientific Council, or CAPES Superior Council). | An on-site visit by external consultants is mandatory. |
| Bibliometric data | *Web of Science*, *Scopus*, *Google Scholar*, *Current Research Information System* (*CRIS*) etc. | Each unit defines the bases and indicators that best meet the needs of the evaluation process (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025). |
| Homogenization and differentiation | Given the characteristics described above, the evaluation system tends to promote greater internal homogenization and, consequently, limit differentiation, diversity, and institutional autonomy (Verhine; Freitas, 2012). | The evaluation criteria are not uniform and, therefore, do not generate standardized results. It does not aim to establish rankings or create indicators for comparison between units. Instead of standardizing and homogenizing the system, the evaluation process preserves diversity and promotes differentiation. The evaluation considers the specific characteristics of each unit (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025). |

**Source:** Prepared by the author based on key regulatory milestones and evaluation policies in Brazil and the Netherlands.

## AA in bottom-up models: the Dutch experience

The document entitled the Higher Education and Research Act, issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) in 1992, and the six editions of the Strategy Evaluation Protocol, published by the VSNU, KNAW, and NWO between 1993 and 2020, consolidated the following principles: (i) be conceived as an inherent dimension of institutional autonomy and strategic planning, (ii) be carried out by institutions and units developing academic activities, (iii) be carried out independently, impartially, and transparently by peers, (iv) combine internal and external evaluation processes (peer review); (v) be conducted without interference or control from the government or funding agencies; and (vi) serve a formative purpose aimed at improving the quality of the evaluated units (Drooge, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d; Trevisol & Brazil, 2023; VSNU, KNAW, & NWO, 2020).

In this sense, the evaluation process is a practice of self-governance, self-management, and institutional planning. It is contextual, procedural, participatory, and formative. It is carried out based on the identity, objectives, and strategies of each evaluated unit (Amaral, 2009; Brennan & Shah, 2000; Drooge, 2021a & 2021b; Verhine & Freitas, 2012; VSNU, KNAW, & NWO, 2020; Vught & Westerheijden, 2012; Weert & Boezerooy, 2007). Thus, evaluation is a dimension closely linked to the strategic planning of the unit being evaluated.

Based on these principles, AA has established itself as the backbone of the system. It permeates and articulates the principles, objectives, criteria, and modus operandi of the entire evaluation process. According to the SEP 2021-2027 (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 19, own translation), AA enables reflection on "the strategies that the unit has adopted, as well as the effects they have produced." The core of the evaluation consists of the unit's objectives, goals, and strategies. As SEP 2021-2027 highlights, AA begins when the unit drafts and "spells out its strategy and objectives" (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 19, own translation). Through the AA, the unit analyzes the results obtained from its mission and objectives, identifies its strengths and weaknesses, and defines the necessary changes and improvements. The unit being evaluated is simultaneously the subject and object of the educational process; it is both the starting point and destination.

Thus, the AA is a crosscutting dimension around which the different stages are articulated and feed into each other. Each institution has the autonomy to organize the process according to its specific needs. The phases are not rigid. As Chart 2 shows, the AA cuts across the different stages.

**Chart 3** – The cross-cutting nature of AA in the main stages of the evaluation process

| Stages | Description |
|---|---|
| Definition of the strategy, objectives, and goals of the unit being evaluated | The unit's strategy and objectives are the starting point. They are defined in advance, preferably at the beginning of the evaluation cycle, based on a series of meetings and seminars whose purpose is to formulate the strategy and goals that the unit will pursue throughout the cycle (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 12-13). |
| Preparation of Terms of Reference (TOR) for the evaluation | Based on the guidelines established by SEP, each HEI prepares the TR for each unit evaluated. The TR is usually finalized about one year before the visit of the external committee (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 12, 16). |
| Preparation of the AA Report | The units have autonomy to define the structure and content of the report. The report should be concise and well founded. Through it, the unit presents its strategy, objectives, and main results achieved over the last six years, as well as its strategic planning for the next evaluation cycle. The document must be sent to the institution's management approximately two months before the evaluation committee's on-site visit. The document is then sent to the external committee (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 12). The report must include, among other aspects: (i) a description of the main characteristics, mission, strategy, and objectives of the unit (current and future); (ii) a sufficiently robust database showing the main results; (iii) strengths and weaknesses; and (iv) the strategic actions it intends to implement in the next evaluation cycle (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 32-33). |
| Composition of the external evaluation committee | Each institution defines the procedures for the composition of the external committee, which should consist of impartial experts, ideally from foreign institutions. A specialized and independent secretariat supports the committee's work. All members must sign a declaration of impartiality (Brazil; Trevisol, 2025; Trevisol; Brazil, 2023). The unit should be evaluated based on its strategy and goals, considering the international, national, and regional contexts when necessary (VSNU, KNAW, & NWO, 2020, pp. 12, 16). |
| On-site visit by the external committee | The unit being evaluated organizes the visit. Through it, external evaluators learn about the unit's infrastructure, conduct interviews and meetings, and request additional information that was not included in the AA report (VSNU, KNAW, & NWO, 2020, p. 13). |
| Preparation of the final report of the external committee | The report should be written in a clear and consistent manner. It should communicate the main conclusions, proposals, and recommendations of the external committee (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 13). |
| Publication of the final evaluation opinion | It is up to the institution's management, based on the report prepared by the external committee, to issue the final assessment opinion. Both the opinion and the report are published on the institution's website (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 14, 17). |
| Discussion of results and follow-up | The discussion of the results and follow-up activities is carried out regularly by the HEI and the evaluated unit. The follow-up follows the quality assurance policies of each HEI. The institution may, exceptionally, recommend that a mid-term evaluation be carried out (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 17). The results of the evaluation are returned to the unit in the form of a report to guide planning and strategic actions for the next cycle. |

**Source:** Prepared by the author based on the main regulatory milestones for evaluation in the Netherlands, especially SEP 2021-2027 (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020).

Although each of the steps described above is important, preparing the AA report is considered the most important phase of the evaluation process. At this stage, each evaluated unit is tasked with the following: (i) analyze the adequacy and relevance of the unit's strategies and goals established over the past six years; (ii) clearly explain the strategies and objectives that will guide the unit's actions and activities in the next evaluation cycle; (iii) present the main advances, weaknesses, and improvements in each evaluation criterion and subcriterion established by the SEP and the unit itself; and (iv) highlight the main results in each evaluation criterion and subcriterion over the last six years (Trevisol, Brazil, 2023; VSNU, KNAW, & NWO, 2020, pp. 6, 9, 10, 13, 19, 20, and 21).

The report must be consistent and based on quantitative and qualitative evidence, case studies, benchmarking, and other relevant information. It must also assess whether the adopted strategy was adequate and if the previously established objectives were fully or partially achieved (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 32). The report is both an assessment and a planning document. Through it, the unit designs the strategy and sets goals for the next evaluation period (VSNU; KNAW; NWO, 2020, p. 6).

## Self-assessment in top-down models: the Brazilian experience

As previously mentioned, top-down approaches have led to models that are primarily based on external evaluation. In countries that adopt this perspective, such as Brazil, internal evaluation has historically been considered secondary and peripheral. As mentioned, PG evaluation policies implemented over the last 60 years have not given internal evaluation a relevant role. Only recently has the topic gained centrality. Unlike undergraduate education, which has recommended AA since the publication of the Institutional Evaluation Program for Brazilian Universities (PAIUB) in 1993 and the National Higher Education Evaluation System (SINAES) in 2004 (Balsanello & Trevisol, 2024; Capes, 2019a; Trevisol & Balsanello, 2022), postgraduate (PG) policies have not strongly encouraged or induced internal assessment (IA). The absence of national guidelines for decades has, in practice, reproduced a fragile and discontinuous connection between internal and external evaluation. Internal evaluation remained sporadic and limited to some higher education institutions (HEIs) (Leite et al., 2022).

The vast majority of Brazilian higher education institutions (HEIs) have not institutionalized affirmative action (AA) policies. For decades, the prevailing view was that evaluation was a form of accountability to Capes. The main purpose of the reports, which were regularly prepared and sent to the external evaluation agency through the "Capes Collection," was to present evidence and indicators on the performance of PGPs during the evaluation period. In this context, these reports were rarely analyzed or debated within the scope of institutional EA policies in HEIs (Trevisol & Brasil, 2020).

Masetto's (2004) study, despite not presenting detailed data on Brazilian HEIs as a whole, reinforces the above theses. According to Masetto, the first AA experience in Brazilian PG occurred in 1983 with the Postgraduate Program in Education at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP). Between 1987 and 1995, records exist of other institutional experiences implemented by the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), the Universidade Federal do Ceará (UFC), and the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp). These experiences emerged amid debates on emancipatory evaluation that took place in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Ana Maria Saul's 1991 book on the subject, the main purpose of AA is "[...] to enable people directly or indirectly involved in an educational action to write their history and generate their alternatives for action" (Saul, 1991, p. 61).

Although the academic debate is not recent, it was slow to impact evaluation policies. In a 2002 paper, Saul documented the resistance the topic faced in its early decades. AA was considered a mechanism for PGPs to protect themselves from the possible negative results of external evaluation. According to Saul (2002), AA was "vehemently contested by those who advocated objectivity in evaluation and, for this very reason, defended exclusively an external evaluation model" (p. 100).

Though brief, the above account helps explain the late incorporation of LA into PG evaluation policies. As mentioned in the introduction, the first CAPES document recommending the institutionalization of LA processes in PG was approved by the CAPES Superior Council in 2018 (CAPES, 2018). The recognition of the topic's relevance and centrality occurred amid a review and update of evaluation policies coordinated by the Special Committee for Monitoring the NPGP. In 2017, the commission began a series of dialogues with the following ministries: The Ministry of Education (MEC), the Ministry of Science, Technology, Innovation, and Communications (MCTIC), and the Ministry of Industry, Trade, and Services (MDIC); regulatory and development agencies: CAPES, the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq), and the Financier of Studies and Projects (FINEP); and with the country's main scientific associations: The Brazilian Academy of Sciences (ABC), the National Association of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Education (ANPEd), the National Association of Directors of Federal Higher Education Institutions (ANDIFES), the Brazilian Association of Rectors of State and Municipal Universities (ABRUEM), the Brazilian Association of Community Universities of Higher Education (ABRUC), and the National Council of State Foundations for Research Support (CONFAP). the National Council of State Secretaries for Science, Technology, and Innovation (CONSECTI), the Technical-Scientific Council for Higher Education of Capes (CTC/Capes), the National Forum of Pro-Rectors for Research and Graduate Studies (FOPROP), and the Brazilian Society for the Advancement of Science (SBPC). The purpose was to rethink and improve the evaluation model (Trevisol, 2022). After months of work, the final document acknowledged that the current evaluation system "has reached a point of exhaustion and must be rethought and improved in both concept and practice" (Capes, 2018, p. 3).

AA was identified as a significant gap in the evaluation system. According to the document entitled "Proposal for Improving the PG Evaluation Model": Final Document of the National Commission for Monitoring the NPGP 2011-2020, October 10, 2018 (Capes, 2018), the absence of AA weakens institutional planning and makes evaluation processes more vertical, quantitative, and disconnected from the various specialties of PGPs. The document recommended AA as an institutionalized, permanent, independent, participatory, and qualified practice. According to the document, AA should be carried out through

> [...] Participatory processes based on various strategies, techniques, and tools generate analytical reports that highlight the program's strengths and weaknesses, revealing corrective and consolidation policies and actions. When structured properly, self-assessment fosters self-knowledge, cultivates an evaluative culture, and provides a qualitative, holistic view of the program, considering training processes and other dynamics inherent to Brazilian postgraduate studies (Capes, 2018, p. 19).

Based on these recommendations, Capes assigned a working group (WG) the task of preparing a proposal for the technical implementation of AA on July 4, 2018 (Ordinance No. 148/2018). The WG's final report published in 2019 and entitled "Self-Assessment of Postgraduate Programs," presents a proposal based on the principle that SA "[...] is the process of evaluating oneself [...]". Its main objective is formative learning. It is a conceptualized and self-managed evaluation process by the academic community. The community owns the evaluation" (Capes, 2019a, p. 7). According to the document:

> The crucial point of the evaluation system proposed here is the shift in focus of the evaluation process: instead of CAPES receiving the results of the self-evaluation carried out by the programs, the agency should monitor how the postgraduate programs are conducting their self-evaluations (Capes, 2019a, p. 9).

The following year, in 2020, the Special Committee for Monitoring the NPGP report also reinforced the potential of AA. According to the 2019 report, AA contributes to the following: (i) Tailoring the evaluation system to the different vocations of PGPs; (ii) Balancing the qualitative and quantitative dimensions; (iii) Strengthening the strategic planning of HEIs and PGPs; (iv) Implementing the multidimensional perspective of evaluation As the report highlights, the AA of PGPs is "an important component of the evaluation of each dimension in the multidimensional model" (Capes, 2020, p. 24).

This set of documents introduced numerous challenges, including the need to review the form adopted for the quadrennial evaluation. In response, Capes established a working group (WG) responsible for preparing the new form through Ordinance No. 148, published on July 14, 2018 (Capes, 2019c). After numerous working meetings, seminars, and discussions, the CTC/Capes approved significant changes to the evaluation form for the 2017–2020 quadrennial evaluation, including reducing the number of questions from five to three. Items "institutional planning" and "self-evaluation" were incorporated into item 1, titled "Program." This change substantially altered how these items were treated by the group of actors that constitute the NPGS. With the approval and adoption of the new form, self-evaluation processes, procedures, and results gained importance and weight in the evaluation of PGP permanence.

Starting in 2019, the Evaluation Areas reorganized their Area Documents and defined the weight and importance of internal evaluation. Area 38 (Education), for example, defined IE as "[...] an exercise in responsible autonomy" (Capes, 2019b, p. 10). According to the document, it is up to the PGPs to "[...] outline an IA capable of capturing aspects relevant to their mission and objectives, including those related to their insertion in the social/international context and their specific scientific choices" (Capes, 2019b, p. 10).

HEIs and PGPs, in turn, were challenged to develop their institutional policies, define procedures for the periodic implementation of AA, outline the mission and objectives of the programs, and involve different actors (faculty, students, alumni, technical-administrative staff, and stakeholders) in the AA processes.

## Lessons and learnings from international experience

The study encouraged an analysis of the Brazilian and Dutch assessment models in terms of their relevance and adequacy. However, when analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of each system, caution must be exercised. It is important to remember that evaluation policies are historical constructs. These policies are part of a broad and complex political, cultural, social, and academic process. These policies were designed and refined based on the characteristics and needs of each nation. The virtues and limitations of each model must be understood within its origin context. While the positive aspects of each system can stimulate and guide good practices, improvements and enhancements are never introduced immediately. Each country must assess the relevance, timing, and form—disruptive or incremental—of implementing them.

These warnings and precautions bring us back to the question posed in the subtitle of this article. The answer to "What does international experience teach us?" is affirmative. The Dutch system's decades-long achievement of high levels of stability and trust offers insights, lessons, and perspectives for countries seeking to adopt hybrid evaluation forms balancing qualitative and

quantitative dimensions, internal and external evaluation processes, and formative and summative dimensions. In this sense, the Dutch experience contributes to Brazil's ongoing effort to introduce and institutionalize neglected evaluation policy dimensions.

The "outside-in" perspective provided by on-site research at the Center for Science and Technology Studies offers elements to identify weaknesses and limitations arising from the absence of AA. Equally important, it recognizes and values the potential emerging from its presence.

**Firstly**, the study indicated that QA is not a recent practice. Rather, it has its roots in a long-standing culture of evaluation. Countries that adopt QA have also established reliable and stable evaluation systems that enjoy a high international reputation and demonstrate academic integrity. The regular, permanent, institutionalized practice of QA has not compromised the quality of research and postgraduate (PG) education in countries that have adopted it, such as the Netherlands, Finland, and the United Kingdom. In these countries, external assessment (EA) is the instrument through which higher education institutions (HEIs) ensure and attest to their quality. External evaluation (by invited consultants) essentially analyzes the reliability and integrity of the information provided (Alderman; Brown, 2005; Capes, 2019a). International experience shows that institutionalizing QA is credible and feasible. Therefore, skepticism about its viability and relevance should give way to policies and practices that integrate internal and external evaluation, among other aspects.

**Secondly**, the comparative perspective provided insight into the late recognition of the importance of AA in PG evaluation policies. Only recently have higher education institutions (HEIs) and professional practice groups (PGPs) been encouraged to develop strategic plans and AA policies. The absence of clear national-level guidelines has contributed to AA being considered irrelevant and unimportant. Therefore, HEIs became accustomed to delegating the task of assessing the quality of courses to CAPES, both at the entry stage (*ex an*te) and at the retention stage (ex post). Over time, the hegemony of external evaluation and the reduced role of HEIs reinforced each other. The weak presence of AA has resulted in the squandering of internal evaluation's potential for HEIs and the entire NPGS. This issue must be acknowledged and addressed.

**Thirdly**, the research shows that AA and institutional planning are correlated dimensions. The presence or absence of one directly affects the other, and vice versa. Top-down systems generally do not encourage higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop and evaluate their program guides (PGs) within the scope of the institutional development plan (PDI) and PG strategic planning. Brazil is a typical example of a system that promoted PG expansion without the necessary coordination or connection with institutional planning. Decisions regarding the creation of new courses were predominantly concentrated in Capes. Through the guidelines and criteria established by the Area Documents, the external assessment system strongly promoted the standardization and modeling of courses nationwide. A lack of planning culture allowed masters and doctoral programs to emerge without connection to the institutional plan for graduate program development. In this sense, institutional planning is essential. Through it, higher education institutions (HEIs) exercise the principle of autonomy and claim the power to decide the profile of the courses they intend to create.

**Fourthly**, bottom-up experiences show that the mission and objectives of courses must be clearly defined in the initial stage of project design. Institutions that design and submit projects for entry/accreditation assessment to CAPES are responsible for this task. Institutional planning and accreditation are valuable tools through which higher education institutions (HEIs) can carefully plan their expansion. This allows them to avoid creating courses that are not in demand and that are far removed from the needs of the regions where they are located. It also allows them to avoid

courses with low innovation in terms of research lines and the results they aim to achieve. Planning strengthens institutional leadership. Just as CAPES' evaluation areas should not define the profile of courses and graduates, the development of new PG projects cannot occur in isolation from institutional planning. Through planning, HEIs can better focus their PG and address daily pressures from groups proposing course projects. This allows them to reconcile conflicts and interests within research groups, departments, and academic units.

The evaluation process cannot be equated with "accountability." This is the **fifth** important lesson that bottom-up models offer the Brazilian system. Performance must be regularly evaluated, but the evaluation must have a clearly defined formative purpose. It must be closely linked to the objectives, goals, and strategies that each PGP establishes within its strategic plan. Evaluation processes that emphasize standardization, homogenization, and comparability between courses (benchmarking) cannot swallow up identity, diversity, and heterogeneity. Evaluation can be carried out jointly by internal and external bodies, but PGPs and higher education institutions (HEIs) cannot decline this responsibility and transfer it to an external institution. Through AA, HEIs and PGPs can identify their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement. Courses should be the starting point and end point of the evaluation process.

## Final considerations

Throughout this text, it has been argued—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—that top-down evaluation systems, such as Brazil's, can benefit from the institutionalization of academic assessment (AA). This strengthens institutional autonomy and planning while helping to reduce the historical asymmetry between external and internal evaluation. Through AA, higher education institutions (HEIs) and program planning groups (PGPs) reassume a role and competence that should never have been taken away or weakened. Strengthening AA within the scope of national and institutional evaluation policies introduces mechanisms that repair and correct a historically produced gap. Given the sophistication and high level of refinement of the external evaluations coordinated by Capes, the NPGS appears stable and mature enough to accommodate new priorities and shift the balance toward internal evaluations. The co-responsibility, involvement, and leadership of HEIs and PGPs in evaluation processes offer great potential to innovate and rejuvenate the NPGS. The external assessment (EA) experiences that take place at the base of the system cannot be wasted; they must be leveraged.

Brazilian PG evaluation policies should promote a greater balance of and integration between internal and external evaluations. In this sense, these two dimensions should be conceived as distinct yet complementary stages. Contrary to current practice, merely granting "ownership of self-evaluation" to higher education institutions (HEIs) and monitoring "how postgraduate programs are conducting their self-evaluations," as proposed by the Capes document entitled Self-Evaluation of Postgraduate Programs (Capes, 2019a, p. 9), is insufficient. We need to go further. The NPGS should expand the role and importance of AA in the evaluation process from start to finish. In this regard, the following changes and improvements are proposed: (i) AA processes should be based on national guidelines; (ii) each PGP's AA report should serve as the basis for the "mid-term" evaluation conducted at the national level; (iii) the "mid-term" evaluation should be conducted every three years and the permanence evaluation every six years. (iv) The NPGS should encourage on-site visits by external consultants (national or foreign) to contribute to the analysis of the AA report and the exchange of experiences between consolidated PGPs and those in the process of consolidation. (v) The AA should primarily analyze the vocation, goals, and strategies that the PGPs establish for themselves during the evaluated period. (vi) The internal evaluation should particularly focus on the social impact of the PG and research.

The theme of the impact of research and postgraduate (PG) education on society provides material for higher education institutions (HEIs) and postgraduate (PG) programs to define the mission and objectives that will guide their activities within their strategic plans. Local and global challenges require universities to constantly rethink their education and research. According to Drooge, Jong, and Smit (2022), the scientific and social impact of research should be treated as symmetrical and interrelated dimensions. Internal evaluation should drive debates on this range of topics. Otherwise, external evaluation risks prioritizing metrics and quantitative indicators that measure the impact of scientific production within areas and sub-areas of knowledge.

These are some pressing challenges facing higher education, science, technology, and innovation in Brazil today. The research reported here is part of an effort to understand these challenges beyond the Brazilian context. The aim was to broaden understanding and intelligibility of the topic. In practice, a translation exercise was carried out. It is believed that knowledge of the world's best AA experiences can motivate and guide the implementation of good practices in Brazil.

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