

# **RETHINKING SCIENCE POLICY IN PORTUGAL - SUGGESTIONS FROM THE COMMUNICATION SCIENCES<sup>1</sup> LETTER TO THE MINISTER OF SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

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## **GENERAL FRAMEWORK FOR REFORM OF THE PORTUGUESE NATIONAL FUNDING AGENCY (FCT)**

Today there is a serious problem concerning who determines what research should be undertaken, and in particular, the priority research topics, the subjects worthwhile to be investigated, and the type of research that deserves to be funded.

What is currently crystal clear to the scientific community, both at the national and international levels, is the fact that the same institution funds research and also decides what should be researched. It establishes what theoretical and methodological paradigms should be adopted, the language that should be used in the research, the rules that must be observed during its appraisal, and finally the geographical and cultural origin of the evaluators.

Today, in general, the scientific community harbours no illusions in this regard: financial support will not be provided to those who demand freedom of research in terms of the subject to be explored, the problem to be analysed, the language to be used and the theoretical and methodological paradigms to be observed.

No state is currently interested in anything but applied and instrumental science, because in the age of the global economy, there appears that nothing exists beyond the world of alliances, solidarities and cohesion created by economic forces, markets dynamics, political commitments and socio-technical cosmopolitanism.

The quality that is currently demanded from science is limited to the concept of “excellence”, which serves the purposes of a utilitarian, productive and mercantile logic, but is a science that is bereft of human complexity, without memory, responsibility or a conscience.

Both the evaluation of research units and projects in all the scientific areas that has been pursued by the Portuguese state over more than a decade, via the Portuguese National Funding Agency (FCT) are processes that enlighten us about the meanings behind the scientific and technological policies pursued by those public entities.

The Portuguese state is moving the country away from alliances with more developed nations, by imposing the English language on Portuguese researchers as the only language to be used, by handing over scientific evaluations solely to foreign researchers,

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<sup>1</sup> Letter send by the head of CECS- Communication and Society Research Center - to the minister of science, technology and higher education, by the occasion of the creation of a group of reflection about the future of science in Portugal, 5 de January, 2016

predominantly from the Anglo-Saxon geographical and cultural universe (which at least in the Social Sciences and Humanities, occurs against the strategic cooperation options taken by the academic community in Portugal, which is strongly oriented towards Portuguese-speaking countries and Ibero-American contexts) and by obsessively valuing the publication of articles in major impact journals as the principal criterion for ascertaining scientific merit, and by establishing scientific boards without consulting the academic community.

This international “aid” to Portuguese research (in terms of the language to be used, the issues to be addressed, the evaluation teams and the theoretical frameworks to be followed), at the request of the Portuguese government (via the FCT), strongly resembles the situation of a country “under international financial assistance”. Thus, also in the field of science, we are experiencing a financial “bailout” situation, with Europe, as the funding institution, establishing the way that science should be conducted. As a result, the Portuguese government maintains a submissive attitude and continues to serve foreign interests rather than responding to the interests of the national community.

An example of this scientific “bailout”, which was particularly harmful to the interests of the Portuguese scientific community, were the cooperation agreements signed in October 2006. The government and the following North American institutions were involved: the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) and the University of Texas at Austin (UTA). These agreements led to a series of initiatives towards scientific and technological cooperation, international research programmes and post-graduate teaching financed by the Portuguese government, via European funding. As a result, significant financial funds that could have supported Portuguese research centres and doctoral and post-doctoral projects were transferred to American universities. To date, no evaluation has been made to assess the outcomes and the advantages that this cooperation policy may have delivered to Portugal.

The Portuguese government has established this strategy to internationalise science, without having considered either the international cooperation strategies already cemented by national research units or the process implemented by the FCT to assess the quality and merits of research units.

Regarding the agreement established between the Portuguese government and the University of Texas at Austin, it is astonishing that the Ministry of Science has selected both the *Universidade Nova de Lisboa* and the *Universidade do Porto* as the partners of that American university in research projects involving digital and multimedia communication. These Portuguese institutions do not possess research centres evaluated as being of excellence in these topics.

According to FCT, the goal underlying this use of foreign organisational models of science in Portugal (scientific areas in Portugal have also recently been redefined according to the European Research Council’s model and the researchers who have evaluated scientific work in Portugal were all members of the European Science Foundation) is to turn Portugal into a partner that can help strengthen Europe’s competitive capacity at a global level.

It is also highly significant that the report produced at the end of December 2011 by the Scientific Board of Social Sciences and Humanities of the FCT, chaired by José Mattoso, includes a letter addressed to FCT's chairman, signed by 88 Economics professors and researchers, demanding "pluralism and interdisciplinary openness in Economics research".

The denunciation of the 'impoverishing unicity of studies in this scientific area' as well as the hostile attitude towards diversity, which results from the subordination of quality to loyalty to a hegemonic canon when assessing research projects, is not, however, a trend that only occurs in the field of Economics. It is, ultimately, an iron law imposed on all the Social Sciences and Humanities.

### **MEASURES FOR ESTABLISHING A NEW DIRECTION**

1. FCT should listen to the scientific community (the research units of excellence, as well as the representative scientific associations, in each specific area), and thus correct the ancestral logic of centralizing science management. This logic has produced, on the one hand, a deeply-rooted tradition of opaque procedures and, on the other hand, bureaucratic logjams in research units. Let's enumerate some examples and some possible solutions:

- FCT has developed a funding policy for research units which places those units in a position of permanent instability: FCT often fails to meet its commitments and raises incessant limitations when it comes to budgetary execution.
- FCT has implemented an enormous number of administrative procedures, which have complicated the daily lives of research units, swamping them with multiple and overlapping reports and questionnaires.
- Scientific associations should be consulted when FCT establishes each scientific panel.
- Projects' appraisal should not be undertaken by blind researchers, chosen without a publicly-known criterion, but by people in charge of shortlists who prepare the dossiers for decisions to be taken by international selection panels.
- FCT should decentralise the process of grants' attribution: doctoral, post-doctoral and "top FCT researchers", therefore allocating part of the money to units of excellence, for these to manage directly.

2. FCT should value knowledge produced in the Portuguese language, supporting, in the Social Sciences and Humanities, books and reputable scientific journals published in this language. Moreover, it should promote in the Social Sciences and Humanities, cooperation with Portuguese-speaking countries, through the endorsement of partnerships in projects and publications from this geographical and cultural area.

3. FCT should establish evaluation panels for calls (of scholarships and projects) which ensure a diversity of paradigms and respect disciplinary traditions and a plural scientific practice. This procedure would soften the trend towards adopting the paradigm of an objectivist and applied science, exclusively focused on producing metrics. Indeed, by harnessing the Social Sciences and Humanities to marketable, productive and managerial strategies, FCT is debasing them. Three examples of this situation are:

- FCT has carried out the evaluation of research units (such as the evaluation carried out in 2013/2014), of projects (such as the call for technological infrastructures in 2013) and of research grants (regarding top researchers, or FCT investigators, in 2012, 2013, 2014), by instituting evaluation panels which lack specific competence in the areas covered by the call for projects.
- FCT has been making the success in Social Sciences and Humanities calls dependent on appraisements provided by the Regional Development Coordinating Committees (CCDR, *Comissões de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional*). These are eminently technical appraisements, also bounded by a type of rationing which only values the projects' "economic impact".
- In the last call for projects in all scientific areas (2014), FCT has also considered for the first time the "project's economic impact" as one of the evaluation criteria for the Social Sciences and Humanities – this is a criterion usually considered to be inappropriate in the case of the Social Sciences and Humanities.

4. FCT should not override research units' decisions as regards their strategic partners for internationalisation.

We have observed this top-down intervention in the past, but it is entirely against the dynamics established in the scientific field and profoundly ignores the competencies well recognised in appraisals carried out by FCT itself.

For example, in the areas of digital communication and multimedia communication, we have seen how FCT has selected, to the undeserved benefit of some, and in detriment to others, unsuitable Portuguese partners for cooperation with the University of Austin. The Communication and Society Research Centre (CECS), the best Communication Sciences centre in the country, classified as Excellent in the last two evaluation process carried out by the FCT (2008 and 2014), was excluded from this process.

5. Furthermore, FCT cannot discriminate against Research Units of Excellence, in favour of Associated Laboratories, whose financial budget has attained around two thirds of the State's total budget for science. I presume that this discrepancy still persists today.

#### **EXPERIMENTING NEW ARTICULATIONS**

Today, Europe presents itself as a unified body, but it is actually in crisis. For this reason, it is important to know that which identifies and distinguishes us as a nation.

1. In a world dominated by socio-economic globalisation, it is necessary to study national, regional and local identities, as well as transnational identities – especially European and Portuguese-speaking identities.

2. We need to respect the Portuguese language as a language of culture and thought, and consequently, recognise it as a language of knowledge. By doing so, we need to ascribe strategic value to the construction of a Lusophone research community.

3. Just as economic and technological growth cannot ignore the cultural dimension, the concept of development cannot ignore the Social Sciences and Humanities. In the age of economic globalisation, driven by the power of technology, the Social Sciences and Humanities mirror the ideal of balanced development, human solidarity and social

cohesion, because they are acknowledgeable as a relevant part of the scientific community and as an integral part of collective development.

#### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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