

The Black Book of Scientific Evaluation in Portugal

Key press releases, letters, articles and texts regarding the subversion and mishandling of the scientific evaluation system in Portugal in 2014 and 2015

Foreword

This book provides a comprehensive picture of the process of subversion and mishandling underwent by the scientific evaluation system in Portugal over the last four years. It is founded on a number of key press releases, letters, opinion articles and chronicles, as well as in other texts published in the press or on the Internet in 2014 and 2015 concerning this topic.

Threatening to undermine Portugal's scientific system, this process of subversion and mishandling has led, among other things, to the disruption of the broad social and political commitment to support the country's scientific and technological development achieved in recent decades. Since mid-2011, when a new government came to power as well as the respective Ministry of Science and Technology (S&T), public policy formulation has changed drastically for the first time in our democracy. This is reflected in increased selectivity on access to science, particularly based on desultory "evaluation" processes. Furthermore, the application of evaluation methods and practices has not deserved recognition and acceptance from the national and international scientific community, as well as has been carried out in a discretionary way and pursuing doubtful benefit purposes for the national scientific system. Indeed, there can be no sustainable scientific system that is based simply on a restricted and exclusive group of scientists. It is indeed a path that is going dangerously close to everything that prevented Portugal from taking up sooner the challenge of science.

Unprecedented movements have then emerged in Portugal and abroad challenging this S&T policy, with particularly a strong expression in social networks and in the media. The negative impacts of the evaluation and funding options and schemes were foreseeable and unavoidable, which directly hit investment in advanced training of human resources and scientific employment, leading to forced emigration of the best skilled human resources (see, for example, the Observatory of Emigration, 2014).

The subversion and mishandling of the scientific evaluation system is one of the key aspects that have affected Portugal's scientific reality in a devastating way, considering the effects that may arise in the future in the social construction of any scientific and technological system. This process has been led by the Portuguese national funding agency, FCT, which is responsible for coordinating and conducting scientific evaluation exercises in Portugal since the 1990s. This is, in fact, one of its most important missions and must be taken up irrespective of the ideological profile of the relevant line Ministry. Nevertheless, the "evaluation" process of R&D units launched by the FCT Board of Directors at the end of 2013, which continued for 2014 until early 2015, was characterized by a buck-passing attitude and disdain for FCT concerning its main mission, given the lack of transparency, the trampling of good practices and the introduction of subsequent changes halfway through the process.

It was no surprise therefore the wave of protests voiced among the scientific community, which have spread to several other communities, reporting and criticizing wrong procedures that have nothing to do with good practices, followed and respected by previous Boards and foreign funding agencies. Doubt was even cast on the trust and recognition until then due to FCT. A climate of uncertainty has been created as a result of the arbitrary way that took hold of the scope and content of evaluation, jeopardizing the respect and trustworthiness due to FCT, not to mention a number of guidelines that have governed the evaluation process, which reflected a faltering policy among erratic strategies and a conception of a national scientific and technological system exclusively focused on privileged/chosen

sectors and hardly compatible with national interest on topics such as sustainability, competition and international recognition.

In 2013 FCT's Board of Directors failed to meet fully and responsibly its main role: to evaluate the national scientific system. Discredit has been brought upon the institution itself, while hurting the national scientific system and its community, as a result of the way this role was undertaken, with aftereffects that may have inevitably a long-lasting outcome. FCT put the trustworthiness of the evaluation exercise at stake among the national scientific community by engaging, in an unprecedented manner (without discussing the issue with the scientific community and without following any tender procedure), an international institution currently with diminished importance and of little competence in terms of evaluation of scientific institutions. Its evaluators, who in previous evaluation processes had direct contact with every institution, now visited only those which, in theory, have been examined on an administrative basis and underpinned by bibliometric data only. Thus, a considerable percentage of the units – approximately 50% - have been excluded from the evaluation exercise. As became apparent later, this precisely resulted from and complied with the terms of reference established by the FCT Board of Directors. It is worth noting that these guidelines have been concealed from the scientific community for months. On the other hand, the approximately 25 review panels, which run in previous exercises, were replaced for six non-specialist, mixed panels. Sometimes, the only expert that participated in the evaluation process had an insufficient curriculum to be contracted out by the institution subject to evaluation. Thus, the practice of scientific evaluation carried out by experts and independent parties has been undermined and its results could not be used as a strategic management tool within institutions and across the country.

It is known today that good practices have also been trampling down in calls for grant proposals and reprehensible and little transparent procedures have been identified. What is more, the FCT Board of Directors has taken part directly in some evaluation results. Classifications awarded by the review panels have been subsequently changed, and FCT Scientific Boards themselves have been forced to adopt a position on this matter. In tender procedures for PhD Programmes there were even stranger situations. First, proposals have been evaluated scientifically and their eligibility examined only at a later stage. As a result, the proposals with the highest scientific classifications, which had been recommended by review panels for funding, have been excluded as they were considered ineligible after evaluation.

It should also be stressed that the process of subversion and mishandling of the scientific evaluation in Portugal in recent years has run in tandem with a significant cut in public spending for scientific activity. Private investment has also followed the downward trend abruptly and remains significantly low, with total annual spending in R&D to be cut to approximately MEUR 500 between 2010 and 2013 (IPCTB 2013). As a consequence, **Portugal's gap compared to Europe has been widening**, with total annual spending in R&D decreasing to 1.34% of GDP (while it had reached nearly 1.55% in 2009 and 2010).

Among other results, there was a drastic cut in the number of PhD and post-PhD grants awarded annually by FCT (from nearly 2300 in 2010 to 1800 in 2012), together with the abrupt adoption of new funding schemes for doctoral programmes, which are primarily and often representative of personal scientific interests of their Directors instead of national interests, apart from relying upon local evaluations, which are more susceptible to clashes of interests than national evaluations.

At the same time, in 2012-2013, a number of approximately 1200 contracts for researchers, who had been selected in international competitions five years before, came to an end. As FCT opened no more than 400 new positions, approximately one thousand PhD holders have been forced to abandon research or leave the country. The number of contracts for researchers should have been significantly increased to avoid forced emigration of the most qualified assets.

But his Black Book is also a book of hope in the future, so that a truthful evaluation system can be properly restored and the scientific evaluation system in place in Portugal in recent years can no longer be put at stake. The book features writings from the scientific community, representing scientists, scientists' organizations, trade unions, scientific institutions, the Council of Associate Laboratories (CLA), University Rectors and the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities (CRUP), presidents of polytechnic institutions and the Coordinating Council of Polytechnics (CCISP), as well as FCT Scientific Boards.

In addition, this Black Book is the response from the scientific community to FCT's "International Evaluation Report", published with pomp and circumstance by the Portuguese government at the end of July and which was commissioned to four scientists, without consulting the scientific community or the scientists' organizations or scientific institutions or University Rectors or CRUP or CLA. Although careful reading of the entire report basically shows the widespread criticism of FCT's procedures over the last few years (see, for example, Annex IV to The Report), the conclusions and recommendations even show a dominant tone of agreement with FCT's Board of Directors. And, in more ideological issues (for example, "to terminate with individual grant calls"; and "to finance only the best", among other aspects), it is not surprising that the report supports FCT's policy in recent years. The evaluators have been chosen precisely for that purpose and they have done what they were expected to do.

It is against those things, but above all to defend knowledge as bringing about a future for Portugal, that we raise our voices and mobilize against the subversion and mishandling of the scientific evaluation system in Portugal such as in recent years.

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