

GLOBAL REPORT ON THE EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH UNITS ON PSYCHOLOGY

PERIOD 1999-2002

ON-SITE VISITS JANUARY 19-26, 2003

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FOREWORD

The Panel members express their appreciation for the organisation of their visits and want to thank all the members of FCT staff for their assistance, their permanent availability, and their smiling style in solving problems.

The present Final Report has been written after extensive discussion of the content in Lisbon, following the on-site visits to all research centres and the interviews with new applicants, in January 2003. It is hoped that it will be of assistance, both to FCT in improving its evaluation procedures and to psychological research groups in Portugal in better identifying their strong and not-so-strong points.

The text of the report in its final version has been approved by all members of the Panel.

Finally, this report is intended to complement the panel reports regarding each individual unit; therefore, it focuses on issues pertinent to all or most of the units.

1. ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

1.1. PRE-VISIT PHASE

1.1.1. Preliminary evaluation and related issues.

Reasons for which FCT was not responsible and that the Panel fully acknowledges, resulted in a rather short interval between the Units' reports becoming available on Internet and the dates of the visits, considering that the Christmas/New Year period was included. A somewhat longer period of time would facilitate the preliminary work of the panel.

More important in this respect, however, have been several problems directly concerning the so-called 'preliminary evaluation', including technical deficiencies in getting access to the electronic files; language problems; difficulties in fair scoring as a result of the heterogeneity between research areas and because of a lack of straightforward matching between report sections and assessment sheet items. These points have been a main concern of the Panel throughout its mission. They have been addressed extensively by one member, Prof. Michon, in a substantive note, unanimously approved by the Panel, to be found as an Annex to the present report. This note contains both a detailed analysis of the problems encountered and clear suggestions for solving them. Prof. Michon's Note is especially valuable not only because of the author's personal experience, but also because it conveys the Dutch model in quality assessment of scientific research, a model that is widely recognised for its efficiency. Reading Prof. Michon's Note, it appears that the comments on the presentation of reports by Units that were already formulated in 1999 by the previous Panel (Final Report, pp. 3-4) still apply, unfortunately, three years later. Suggestions to improve on the prevailing situation should therefore be seen as an urgent recommendation to introduce a number of fairly drastic but highly desirable changes.

1.1.2. Units Reports: Publications.

The way publications are presented in the Units' reports deserve special attention, because the general issue of publications had been emphasised by the 1999 Panel, and will be dealt with below (section 2.1.3) with reference to that Panel's recommendations.

External assessors would get a better picture if publications were listed by lines of research rather than for the whole Unit, all lines confounded.

The list of (five) most significant publications in the last three years should clearly point to what the various research groups within a Unit consider as their best output (if there are more than five research lines, number of most significant publications might be increased accordingly). Full-text versions of these publications should be made available on the Web so

that assessors have access to them in preparing their preliminary evaluation.

Also, it would be informative to compare the number, nature and level of publications with the "expected outputs" as stated by the Units three years before. This would tell how "(un)realistic" the prospects were at that time. In addition, since the aim is to assess the performance of each Unit and its principal research lines as a whole, listings of the numbers and types of publications in the main body of the reports should be for the Units as a whole and for the research lines, not for individual staff members. In other words, individual performance statistics should go into the personal CV sections.

Finally and perhaps as a result of the peculiar traditions of the human sciences, a lot of confusion seem to prevail as to what "international journals" exactly means. Publishing in a local foreign language journal, possibly provincial in scope and with no peer review, is obviously not equivalent to publishing in a recognised international journal with highly selective editorial board and severe refereed filtering of papers. As it seems, researchers in psychology should be provided with precise recommendations on that point. Instructions to prepare their reports should contain some reminder of what exactly is meant by "international publications", referring to journals that are listed in databases such as ISIknowledge, PsychInfo, Psychological Abstracts, or Σ .

1.1.3 Units Reports: additional remarks.

Whilst some reports comment on strong and weak points of their unit, most of them do not. Such concise exercise in self-evaluation can be very illuminating, however, and should be made mandatory.

Reports contain a lot of non-informative writing at the expense of relevant issues. Thus, for instance, more details about international relations and cooperation should be presented in a concise way. Rather than presenting a simple list of names of persons or institutions involved in such contacts, the nature of the relations should be mentioned (are they just good friends of the centre's head, or - more relevant - partners in European projects, in joint research or publishing, etc.); who are involved in them (senior members, young PhDs, graduate students, the number of members, etc.); with what results (students and staff mobility, development of new projects, acquiring and bringing home new research skills, etc.).

Maybe a last remark concerning the reporting done by the Units is the bad quality of most written reports. This in particular made preliminary evaluation extremely difficult and full of uncertainties as to what the Units tried to communicate to the evaluators. Besides problems of consistency of the instructions to authors, the required format of the reports and the

assessment sheets, addressed at some length in Prof. Michon's Note, one may wonder whether the dubious quality of most reports does in fact reflect a negative attitude toward the FCT requirement for such a report, that may have been perceived as a bureaucratic and time consuming. The contrast with oral presentations during the visits tends to confirm this interpretation. The idea that the written report is the principal basis for evaluation and that it should therefore be prepared most carefully is perhaps is not rooted in the Portuguese scientific culture, which tends to be more concerned with direct human contact (a view suggested by the Portuguese-born member of the Panel). If so, it is a further responsibility of FCT to change this mode of thought; otherwise, written reports will remain inadequate.

1.2. ON-SITE VISITS

1.2.1. After-visit individual assessment.

The Panel is of the unanimous opinion that after-visit individual assessment is illogical and unnecessary. This point is discussed under point 7 of the Annex. This is why "after-visit individual assessment" forms were not filled, each panellist referring to the Panel Report.

1.2.2. Duration of visits.

Given the size of most units, time devoted to visiting them was far too short compared with the amount of time spent on interviews with new applicants. This has been frustrating for the Panel's members as well as for the members of the Units visited.

In future assessment sessions a different policy should be adapted. On one hand, the time schedule should take into account the number of research groups composing each Unit. On the other hand, applications for funding should be submitted to a pre-selection procedure by the Panel on the basis of written documents; this would reduce the number of interviews, and leave some extra time for visits proper. Large centres would thus be given more than the two or so hours that are allocated now.

1.2.3. Organisation of visits.

As already mentioned, oral presentations of their work by the centres' members were of an overall much better quality than the written reports. This, fortunately, provided the Panel with a much more positive perspective of the aims and achievements of the Units and, consequently, with much more appropriate information upon which it could base its assessments.

The Centres had organised the visit in their own way. There is basically no objection to

such diversity, were it not for the fact that in some cases members of subunits may have become frustrated for not having more time to interact with Panel's members. The reason is that in general considerable time is being spent in an initial session involving only a few senior members of the unit, responsible at the highest level. A more open scheme, in principle involving all members, might be recommended, or even required, in order to put all units in similar conditions, at least in that respect.

Some aspects of the organisation of visits might also be requested by the Panel, after brief electronic exchanges between its members already informed from their reading of the report. This supposes a reasonable delay between reception of the electronic files and the visits.

2. GENERAL COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

2.1. OVERALL SITUATION OF RESEARCH IN PSYCHOLOGY IN PORTUGAL.

2.1.1. Fields covered in basic and applied psychology.

The distinction between basic and applied research is admittedly somewhat artificial but, historically speaking, it has been important for the development of psychological research, applied fields being generally favoured in the early stages in most countries. Psychological research in Portugal is still largely devoted to applied fields, some traditional, such as educational psychology, some more recent, such as health psychology. However, given the world-wide development of basic research, as well as the progressive articulation and enrichment of applications on the basis of fundamental research, one should expect young psychologists in Portugal to turn more frequently to some of the many fascinating basic research areas currently blossoming. Neuropsychology and developmental psychology are prominent examples of areas where rapid progress is now being made.

2.1.2 Training of young researchers.

Part of the apparent lack of curiosity among young researchers may derive from the relative unimportant status that is given to the possibility - some would say the necessity - of spending some length of time studying in reputed foreign research centres. Be it because of a lack of encouragement from their home institution, or because of a lack of motivation, students do not readily seem to take advantage of the many opportunities available today. Actually considerably more money is spent solely for the purpose of participating in scientific meetings than on allowing junior researchers to acquire specific research skills in more extended visits of between, say, a month and a full year. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this issue. PhD candidates and their supervisors, especially

those in small countries, should be aware of the fact that nowadays training abroad is a major prerequisite for reaching international level in science. Although presently it may be still somewhat farfetched to expect that universities will soon make this a mandatory requirement for a PhD degree, agencies such as FCT might like to take this important step by demanding international experience as part of the conditions for students benefiting from a grant and similarly as a condition for PhD members of research centres to be eligible for funding.

2.1.3. Publications.

With a few praiseworthy exceptions, the level of publications does not match what one would expect. The number of papers published in international journals with peer review is low and sometimes nil. As the international visibility of publications is one of the criteria used for assessing the output of research activities by FCT and all comparable agencies in the world, the Panel has paid special attention to the achievements of the units in this respect. The problem has previously been dealt with at length by the previous Panel in 1999 (see the 1999 Final Report pp.5-7, § 6 & 7), among other things by lowering the score of some Units. Specifically the 1999 Panel pointed out the counterproductive habit of psychology departments of establishing their own journals or book series. These media may perhaps entail some national visibility, which in itself is of course a perfectly legitimate goal. A less fortunate consequence of these publicity efforts is that they are channelling a large part of the local production towards the home Journal, including material that is likely to be accepted by international refereed journals, if only an effort would be made to prepare it in the appropriate format.

We can only endorse the warnings and recommendations made by the previous Panel, and point out that, on the whole, the challenge has not been met, with the consequence that some Units have received lower rating than they might otherwise have deserved. Further reflection on this issue would take us beyond the assessment task of the present Panel. Yet, we strongly advise psychologists in Portugal to reconsider their publications policy, in a dialogue between university departments on one hand, and between university departments and professional associations on the other. Various lines might profitably be explored, among which: merging of some existing journals or series; joining efforts to develop well targeted journals, one (or more) addressing professional audiences, another (or others) addressing the research community; introducing a stricter peer review system; and finally invite, at least in some journals, publication in the English language of some of the material, with the aim of making the journal's contents known among foreign researchers and attracting foreign researchers to submit good quality manuscripts.

2.1.4. General facilities.

Though time was lacking to visit in depth the technical facilities of the Units, these seem, on the whole, to have improved over time. Equipment, libraries, laboratory spaces and offices appear satisfying in most places and excellent in some. Funding for research may not always match the ambitions of researchers, but some groups appear fairly successful in raising funds from national or international sources. Other groups could certainly become more active in this respect by submitting projects to funding agencies, both at the national and international level, public or private.

2.2. SPECIAL DIFFICULTIES

2.2.1. Teaching load of PhD and many non-PhD members.

One important factor to be taken into account when assessing psychological research centres in Portugal is the teaching load of most persons engaged in research, and consequently the amount of time they can really devote to research. A rough estimate would indicate that this amount is, at best, around 25 percent. Young PhD students enjoying a position of Assistant have a weekly teaching schedule of up to ten or twelve hours, in many cases lecture classes rather than 'practical'. Taking into account the time needed for preparing their courses and the fact that, more often than not, they are required to teach subject matters that are quite remote from their research speciality, they are left with little time for research. Except for students with a PhD-grant from some foundation such as FCT, who presumably do indeed work full-time on their research, all other members of the Units, both PhD and pre-PhD, are in fact part-time researchers. One should not expect their outputs to equal those of full-time members. The remedy is beyond the control of research funding agencies. It implies a fundamental reconsideration of teaching loads in the current organisation of departments of psychology and, of course, of the curricula. Portuguese universities are in a better position to solve this problem than countries such as France, Italy or Belgium, where the number of students admitted is not limited. A major step towards securing enough time for research could be made if psychologists would gain clear awareness of this issue of unrealistic teaching demands and would be willing to deal with it in a more reasonable way.

One obstacle may be again the weight of local traditions, possibly heavier in human sciences than in natural sciences. One case in point, difficult to understand to an external observer, is related to the career perspective of young assistants. The law, reflecting proper awareness of the necessity for individual research, free from excessive teaching or other tasks, offers them the possibility to take up to three years dedicating themselves

exclusively to their doctoral research. A surprisingly low number of them take advantage of that possibility. It is not clear what are the reasons for that: tradition, tacit agreement with the academics of higher rank to fulfil their teaching tasks without interruption, risk of reducing one's chances to obtain life tenure, family or other private factors?

To sum up, the Panel's recommendation in this matter is to urgently take any feasible step that will lead to better integration of research and teaching, which is perhaps the most fundamental feature of the university as the embodiment of advanced intellectual curiosity. Such measures would indubitably be of tremendous benefit to teaching and research alike.

2.2.2. Remodelling the structure of research Units?

The structure of research centres is still pretty much the same as it was when they were started. The centres were initially organised according to a certain scientific logic, but also, as one would expect, to the local specifics of human relations. People have changed, however, a younger generation coming in and new research domains emerging. Seen from outside, the present configuration of the centres exhibits features that appears obsolete, illogical or unfavourable to further development.

If we agree that research centres should have a critical size of 20 to 40 PhD members (which seems to be the present FCT policy), most centres visited do meet or almost meet this norm. Given the variety of research domains covered, they are normally divided into a number of, by and large quite heterogeneous, sub-units. These sub-units are sometimes very different in size, some of them being in turn composed of a large number of « sub-subunits » operating as a 'Centre' under a rather artificial general title. It would be simpler to have a label for the Centre, and a number of subunits, all of them on the same level, working in autonomy, with co-operation as needed or wished, breaking the rather hierarchical structure as it is now. This would provide brilliant young researchers with a more favourable context to develop their projects.

Closely related is the problem of the directors or heads of centres, and the load of responsibility they sometimes cumulate. Being head of the Centre and simultaneously in charge of several research groups within the centre, may interfere with good management or scientific supervision or both. Such conditions are obviously the result of local history and institutional tradition. At some point, they may begin to have undesirable consequences. FCT might consider recommending limitation of simultaneous charges, and limitation of years in office of centre heads.

It so occurs that two centres coexist at the University of Lisbon, both of them equally heterogeneous as acknowledged in their names, both including research teams working in

the same areas. This undesirable state of affairs, again derived from local history, should be addressed shortly, by restructuring the Centres, for greater coherence and efficiency. The two centres might be maintained, changing their mission, their names and their composition, which would require reciprocal exchanges partly perhaps of a somewhat complicated and initially painful nature. Alternatively two centres might merge, each individual member taking occasion to confirm his/her interest in pursuing research, deciding to opt out.

2.2.3. Global rating: perverse effects.

Panel reports on each Centre include an overall rating on a five points scale.

This is a crucial decision, since the amount of funding is dependent upon the score obtained. Most centres, however, include at least one research group that would deserve the qualification excellent and also some that should be rated poor. Since the total amount of funding is likely to be distributed equally among the teams within a centre, excellent and very good teams are punished because they have to live under the same roof with poor-rated ones, which, in turn are rewarded, for the same reason. This is a paradoxical by-product of overall rating.

FCT should be more discriminative in that matter and develop a procedure for discouraging less successful researchers to continue working the way they do, with little concern for international standards, and for reinforcing the prominent ones for their success. Clearly, one aim of quality assessment should be to encourage those who do well and dissuade those who perform badly.

2.2.4. Follow-up of Panel recommendations.

There is one additional important link in this information chain that deserves serious consideration: little is known about the reactions of the Centres to the Panel's conclusions. How are they received? Do the Centres take proper heed of the Panel's recommendations and why? Such information should assist FCT in assessing the assessments. Following current practice in other countries FCT might profitably ask the Units to produce a written rejoinder, stating in which way they expect to follow up on the Panel's assessment.

This rejoinder would then provide the subsequent assessment panel with insight in the way the Units dealt with the earlier panel's recommendations. This would make it easier to determine the relative success of any relevant actions taken during the three-year term separating the assessments.

3. SUMMING UP

The points discussed above deal mainly with problems, difficulties and flaws. This of course does not tell the whole story about assessment procedures and about psychological research in Portugal.

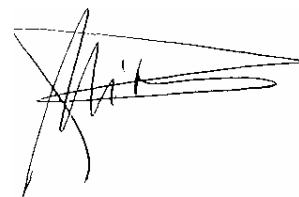
Whatever their imperfections, FCT assessment procedures have the merit to exist and, as far as psychologists are concerned, to be fairly accepted. Going back to the first introduction of psychology as a discipline eligible for funding, and consequently for external evaluation (under JNICT), it is remarkable that initial reluctance has given the way to acceptance, and co-operation.

Psychological research has undoubtedly progressed during the last ten years or so, to an important extent as a result of FCT incentives. Criteria for evaluation have been changing: from the initial approach of assessment panels focusing mainly on encouraging psychologists to catch up with the criteria applied in natural sciences and to engage in the pursuit of international recognition, more recent panels have been increasingly strict in assessing the achievements and in identifying those aspects that still need improvement. It is fair to say that Portuguese psychology deserves a good deal of credit for the way it has adapted to the increasing standards of scientific and professional quality in research.

Over all, the research centres are doing well, but with important differences between a few truly excellent sub-units (let us say a dozen for the whole set of centres), some very good and good ones, and some really poor. To boost psychological research in Portugal on its way to excellence, a general effort should be made to modify behaviour with respect to several aspects that have been discussed above in this report, essentially with respect to publication policy, the international dimension in the training of young researchers, and the internal organisation of psychology departments so that teaching load would no longer impede research activities to the extent they appear to do at present. Also, the structure of centres and the rules for the allocation of FCT funds might profitably be revised, so as to avoid the paradoxical effects observed, that tend to reward those who do little while reducing resources for those who do well. In retrospect, it would seem advisable to have individuals and sub-units within centres re-examine their position with respect to the research centre concept as developed by FCT and the criteria used for supporting them. Some might conclude, quite legitimately, that it would be preferable for them not to belong to a centre any longer. This should not be considered a loss of value, position or merit by any means: one may well perceive one's own field or style of working as not fitting in the present scheme of research centres, or choose to give priority to one's dedication to teaching. Like in many other countries this should be considered a

perfectly legitimate position and the institutions to which the research centres belong should be invited to accept this as a regular part of their human resource policies.

The Panel expresses its hope that those directly concerned will give due consideration to the comments and recommendations presented in this report and take the necessary steps to improve on certain critical issues to reach the desired level of, internationally recognised, quality. Reaching such a level would imply many things, a vitally important one being, in the opinion of the Panel, that the Portuguese psychological research centres would become attractive to young researchers from abroad as a place for learning and personal growth.



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Coordinator

ANNEX

NOTE ON FORMALITIES AND FORMS CONCERNING THE FCT EVALUATION

PROCEDURE

JOHN A. MICHON

This note contains some reflections about the FCT Psychology Unit Evaluation 2003. The evaluation panel had to cope with a number of difficulties of an administrative nature when handling the reports submitted by the units and the forms (both paper and electronic) that were to be filled in during the evaluation process. The following remarks are not meant to touch upon each and every problem encountered, but they should make clear to FCT that the present procedures are inadequate, causing an inordinate amount of unnecessary work to both panellists and research units (and perhaps also to the FCT office).

As was put forward during the meeting with the vice-president on Wednesday evening, 22 January 2003, these issues appear serious enough to give the entire matter of reporting and evaluation special and urgent attention. The advice is to contract with a specialist in the area of evaluation methodology to design a consistent and coherent procedure for future use. Unlike what I suggested during the aforementioned discussion with the vice-president, it would not seem to require six months of work to accomplish this task. Probably a two-month period would suffice to complete a project of this complexity.

1. Proper attention should be paid to explain to all those concerned what is the main goal of the program. First-time panel members received no written evidence about the aims of the program. Also there was no written information about the questions asked from the units, or the type and amount of funding to be allocated. While this became (more or less) clear once the evaluation was underway, it ought to have been available right from the beginning. Under the present conditions the lack of relevant information on these matters makes it practically impossible to undertake a meaningful preliminary evaluation of the applications.

2. A reason for believing that the units are suffering from a similar lack of information is the extremely deficient quality of almost every report submitted. In the first place there were

apparently as many different opinions about what the reports should contain as there were units, making a comparison practically impossible. The content ranged from stating what the unit planned to do with the extra support (such as teaching faculty the art scientific papers), to more—and often less—explicit statements about the research to be undertaken during the next three years, to descriptions of the numbers of books and articles that are hopefully going to be produced during this period.

The sad fact is that only one or two units had (correctly) understood that the evaluation panel was indeed going to evaluate the unit's performance over the past three years. It is difficult to understand why so few of the units got this bright idea. In the panel's opinion it should go without saying that it is impossible to pass a meaningful judgement about a unit's achievements if no pertinent information is provided in the unit's report. The fact that practically all units were able to give a more or less satisfactory account, during the panel's visit or during the interview, implies that the directives provided by FCT have been inadequate in this respect.

3. Apart from the point raised in the previous paragraph, it is evident that the form on which the reports have been entered is highly unsystematic. It should take not a great deal of time to come up with a much improved and logically coherent form instead. It is not the panel's task to make elaborate suggestions at this point, but a few essential points readily suggest themselves.

The first point is that the guidelines provided by FCT to the units should be much more systematic, explicit and restrictive as to the information to be entered by the units into their report. This requires a systematic appraisal of what it is that FCT (and the panels) need to know in order to determine whether past performance and future plans are in correspondence with the goals and criteria of the FCT program. This entails a logical format to be followed, beginning with a statement of the general aims of the unit, the way these aims are pursued, the means available, the history of the unit, the performance since the preceding evaluation (including an explanation of what has been done to meet earlier critique), an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, and only then a plan for the next period that clearly explains the direction taken in relation to the recent past and any new insights that the unit may have developed (and that supposedly justify the continuation of FCT support for the unit). There should be limits imposed on the length of the reports. For small units 5 pages should be adequate and for large units a meaningful limit would be of the order of 10 to 12 pages.

4. The FCT office must introduce a filtering procedure to check whether reports or applications do meet the standard of comprehensibility and completeness. A case in

question is the use of the English language: in the present evaluation 20 percent of the reports were written entirely or largely in Portuguese. Panels should not be bothered with seriously (or even mildly) deficient reports.

5. A further difficulty encountered by the panel relates to the incompatibility of the format of the report and that of the form to be filled in by panellists prior to the panel meeting in Portugal. Given the inadequate guidance units receive from the guidelines and from the report form (as discussed in points 1, 2 and 3 above), there is very little correspondence between the various sections of the report and the questions (rankings) asked from the panellists. This puts an inordinate amount of homework on the shoulders of the panel members and it will, despite all serious efforts, almost necessarily lead to essentially random ranking assignments. Worse even, the actual quality of the reports submitted to the panel would for the most part have led to rankings of only 1 and 2 had the panel members adopted a perspective based strictly on the adequacy of the information provided by the reports.

6. In 2001 the project panel for Psychology has urged FCT to modify the lay out of its electronic forms in such a way that it would be possible to print the entire proposal with one click of a button. This year, to the panel's annoyance nothing of the kind had happened. The panel therefore wishes to emphasize again that the current state of affairs makes the downloading of files unnecessarily cumbersome. In fact the printing of one single report required between 10 and 15 minutes undivided attention of a panel member (or his/her secretary). This is not an adequate way of using panellists' time and especially irritating in view of the fact that it is extremely simple to modify the format of the electronic forms such that all information (i.e., every (sub)section can be reached by links within one single main file. In doing so it is not only possible to have buttons for a table of contents but also to have local buttons for going to 'top of page' or 'previous section' or 'next section'.

7. Finally, while it makes sense to give panellists an opportunity to establish their individual opinion regarding each application, prior to the meeting of the entire panel. there is no logical justification in requesting that panel members review their individual evaluation once the meeting is underway. The panel members are in continuous deliberation about the entire set of proposals, and any expectation that one can subsequently separate opinions is psychologically futile. Consequently the after visit, individual reports should be abandoned.