

# On the Assessment of Portuguese Universities

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Portugal has been progressively introducing a culture of assessment in Higher education.

The change has been fast and well succeeded. The assessment of university courses started in a very tentative way around 1995 among fears of rejection by the community and a lot of suspicion. This exercise was organized by the CRUP (the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities) with delegated powers of the Ministry of Education. The first round was completed with a reasonably high technical quality and its success led to the extension of the process to non-university public Higher Education and to private institutions. This process of assessment is designed in a way that attempts to consider all aspects related to contents and the teaching/learning process for each particular undergraduate degree. Research performance was considered only in a very indirect way.

The Foundation for Science and Technology started in 1996 a process of re-organization of Portuguese research. This led to the setup of a network of Research Units that associate most of the active research staff in the Universities. A system of assessment was developed. It is based on a periodic peer review by international experts that ends up in a simple labelling of the Research Unit as Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, or Poor. The result has a direct impact on the funding of the Unit. This process has been fairly well accepted by the scientific community. The fact that the assessment is totally based on subjective expert opinions led to some difficulties but it is generally accepted that this represents a huge progress. This progress should be measured both by (i) the acceptance of a culture of assessment and (ii) an improvement of the performance of Portuguese researchers. After this very positive appreciation of the progress attained in the last few years, the next step in the improvement of the Portuguese system should be discussed and planned. I shall look at this from the point of view of the Higher Education Institutional assessment.

As stated above, the great success of the first round of assessment of the "Licenciaturas" at the public universities is the simple fact that it was done. The process of self-assessment within each institution,

- brought academic staff into contact with a philosophy of assessment, often for the first time;
- trained some academic staff, especially the coordinators of the self-assessment reports, in the particular methodology used;
- originated a wide reflection on the value and limitations of an assessment;
- made it clear that a permanent system of data collection within the institutions was necessary;
- identified areas where improvement was recommended.

It may be said that this assessment process played a crucial role in institutional self-knowledge. The process was designed from the beginning in a way that no immediate consequences, financial or of any other administrative type, would fall on the institution. Following the model adopted in the Netherlands, the goals are to promote quality making recommendations and following up the results. This was thought to be crucial for the process to be accepted in the first place but it created some frustration at the end, especially for the people more heavily involved. The lack of quantitative indicators was also designed from the beginning to hinder any attempt at ranking institutions or degrees. This has, however, the effect that the areas where progress can be achieved are normally fuzzy and those more clearly stressed are outside the reach or capacity of the people directly involved in the process. This limits the use of the exercise, hinders its contribution or improvement and makes it difficult to sustain such a heavy effort in a regular way in the future.

Examples abound in the world of assessment systems that employ varying sets of quantitative indicators. It is to be expected that the Portuguese system will incorporate this strategy once the current round, the first for the polytechnic and private subsystems, is complete.

To prepare this evolution, it appears appropriate that universities take the lead and start designing and testing some indicators. This requires a wide range of information that our universities do not always have readily available. For research, however, the Foundation for Science and Technology and the Observatory

of Science and Technology collect and organize data on research outcomes of most university researchers. These data are organized by Research Unit. In most cases, however, universities have a different organization, the Department being typically the lowest unit responsible for teaching undergraduate students, for organizing postgraduate courses and evaluating the supervising research work at M.Sc. (Mestrado) and Ph.D. (Doutoramento) level.

The quality of advanced research training depends on the quality of the research being done in the Department. In some cases, it may be argued that the research student establishes a direct relationship with his personal supervisor. His immediate research group will have a major influence in the success of the research project but the wider atmosphere of work in related topics in the Department should not be minimized.

Making available an assessment of the research outcomes of departments would clarify the conditions of the advanced research training going on in our universities; it would put some pressure on the departments to put into practice a policy of recruitment of younger members of staff conducive to the improvement of the overall quality. In some areas the immediate introduction of this type of assessment may raise some problems. But how can we allow a department without visible research activity to accept a Ph.D. student? Can we expect this student to perform research work of international standards? And it should be clear to everybody that no other standards exist in our sphere of knowledge.

A good example in this direction appears in the Report on the Assessment of the research units that was published by the Ministry of Science and Technology in September 2001 in paper form and is also available electronically at [www.fct.mct.pt/unidades/relatorio](http://www.fct.mct.pt/unidades/relatorio). The report for chemistry presents a table with a number of comparative indicators applying to the 19 units assessed. With the nine indicators shown, it is not easy to produce a single acceptable ranking, but this report contains food for thought and discussion among the researchers involved on how to improve their standing.

This attempt at using quantitative indicators is an example to be considered seriously. It does not substitute for the peer review exercise but gives some form of objective assessment that may suggest roads to improvement to individuals and to institutions. The Portuguese University needs it desperately to compete in the international arena. About 100 000 Europeans take the TOEFL test each year to prepare for admission to North-American universities. The number of Portuguese youngsters studying in foreign European universities is small (close to 3% in 1996/97, according to the Eurostat) but growing; it will come as no surprise that the balance of these exchanges is rather negative as Portuguese institutions attract only 0,3% of its students from abroad and mostly from traditional emigration destinations... The threat is clear even if, fortunately, with a small impact in the short term. Starting a pilot assessment along the lines outlined here may catalyse a new way of thinking, as the institutional assessment the Universities of Gothenburg, Utrecht and Porto (see Boletim, Universidade do Porto, no 28, Maio 1996) produced in the last decade.