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Rectors of the Portuguese Universities,

Directors of the USA-Portugal Programmes

Ladies and Gentleman

The operational model that was chosen at the launching of the three Programmes to be discussed today (MIT-Portugal, CMU-Portugal and UTA-Portugal), had never been previously tested. Thus, the Programmes represented the first collaboration agreement between US-Universities and the Portuguese government itself, and they involved several universities throughout the country, rather than a single partner university.

Aiming at a large-scale intervention, on the other hand, the experiment of these USA-Portugal partnerships, if successful, would both bring advantages to Portugal, and it could represent an important case study for the American universities themselves.

I must say at this point that experimental as they might have been, these Programmes were not the only path towards internationalization of Portuguese Science and Technology.

For example, Doctoral Programmes, also supported by FCT, that had been launched more than a decade earlier, had been sending some 70% of their students to the best universities and research institutions in the world, to conduct their thesis work. These PhD Programmes have been highly competitive, given that for some 6000 applications over the years the average enrollment rate was 12%.

These early Programmes have, indeed, nurtured a new generation of highly qualified young Portuguese researchers. Together with many other concomitant political initiatives directed to the support of research institutions and to the competitive funding of research grants, they have been at the very root of the remarkable success of Portugal in Science & Technology over the last decades.

The USA-Portugal partnerships have built, therefore, on this previous effort of the country to develop its Science & Technology system.

As you know, in June 2011, upon completion of the first 5 years term, the previous Government decided to extend the contracts of the three US-Portugal Programmes



until September 2012, following the recommendation of the Portuguese Council of Rectors to the Minister of Science and Higher Education.

The Rectors, aware as they were of the financial situation of the country (which, by that time, was already under external financial assistance) have, fairly enough, also recommended that the decision on the continuation of the Programmes should be left to the new Government, who was precisely taking office in the same month.

The new Government was thus faced with a difficult decision. The costs of the Programmes - which had, by then, enrolled 1119 doctoral and Master students and supported 60 project-grants - were far from trivial by national standards. Thus, all the commitments related to the first 5 years of the Programmes, will eventually reach around 190M€, accounting for approximately 6% of the budget of FCT for the same period.

FCT itself, as our scientific community knows very well, was already operating under difficult conditions since 2010, due to reductions of its annual budget, which had not been accompanied by an equivalent reduction of its activities.

The financial situation of FCT became even more strained in 2012, due to the worsening of the economic situation. Therefore, in order to honor ongoing commitments of around 9000 fellowships, 4000 project grants, 1500 contracts of scientists and other personnel, as well as the support of over 300 research institutions, that is to say, in order to guarantee the very sustainability of the national Science and Technology System, the Government had no choice other than negotiating a significant reduction of its annual contributions to all international S&T organizations, for the entire period of financial assistance, starting in the current year.

USA-Portugal partnerships were no exception. Last December, the Portuguese Directors of all US-Portugal Programmes (the present three and the Harvard Medical School Programme) were asked to carefully reconsider the initial plans for 2012, so that costs could be reduced without damaging ongoing fellowships and grants. They have done as requested, an effort that I would like to warmly acknowledge.

Each Programme had been yearly evaluated by distinguished External Scientific Review Boards, which were instrumental in correcting deviations and in advising on the best way to proceed. The Government is grateful to the members of External Boards for their insight and contributions.

Yet, the Government concluded that the decision on the continuation of the three Programmes should be based, not only on the reports of each individual Programme, but also on an independent assessment that might provide an aggregated and comparative view of the 3 Programmes, a procedure that had not been contemplated in the initial plans.



We are, indeed, strong believers on the benefits of regular and independent evaluations of state policies. They are useful not only for assessing their correctness, but also because they offer opportunities for timely corrections of potential errors and deviations. This is all the more important when experimental initiatives are at stake, as it was the case of these Programmes.

Respected worldwide for many reasons, the Academy of Finland has a long tradition of regular evaluations of science policy in Finland, at different levels, ranging from the institutional level to the whole national S&T system. The Academy of Finland, therefore, was the Institution chosen to perform this evaluation.

The exercise was a major challenge, especially because the Government asked the Academy to undertake it in a very short period of time. The urgency was dictated by the necessity to not irreversibly endanger a smooth transition for a new cycle, should the Academy recommend the continuation of the Programmes.

We cannot thank the Academy enough for having accepted the task, and for enduring the tremendous effort and bureaucratic complications that it entailed.

Following the Academy report, the recommendations of the Government were transmitted to the three Governing Boards by late February, so that they could start immediately working on the future roadmaps.

We are grateful to our American partners, and, especially to the Directors of the Programmes, for their willingness to help and for the effort they are making to reshape the plans of activities in accordance with the recommendations of the Government, and to accommodate the imperative budget reductions.

Leonor Parreira

Secretary of State for Science

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