

FCT Evaluation of R&D Units 2013

Guidelines for Complaints

The following document presents guidelines for the complaints procedure of the systematic assessment exercise of research units in Portugal, begun in 2013. According to Portuguese law and regulations, all R&D units that were assessed have the right to submit an official complaint on the decision reached by the evaluation panels.

1. Context

Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT) is the Portuguese funding agency for science and technology, under the supervision of the Minister of Science and Education. FCT's budget for science, of approximately €460 million, accounts for 30% of total public funding for science and technology in Portugal.

FCT funds talented researchers, internationally competitive research centres and research infrastructures, across all areas of science. FCT promotes international cooperation in science and technology as well as knowledge transfer between academia and industry. Since 2012, FCT is also the agency that coordinates public policies for the Information Society and maintains the infrastructure for high performance computing and communications that provides services to research institutions across the country.

R&D units are regularly evaluated by FCT (approximately every 5 years). Evaluation is carried out by independent panels of internationally recognised experts. Funding is granted based on the grade awarded to each research unit, its size (number of PhD holders) and, in the latest 2013 review, laboratory intensity and requested budget. The current landscape of FCT-funded research Units and Associate Laboratories was largely established after the 2007 and 2008 reviews, respectively. FCT currently funds 292 R&D Units and 26 Associate Laboratories.

The evaluation process of the 2013 review of R&D units had two stages. The first stage entailed remote reviews followed by assessments by evaluation panels. The remote review consisted of three external reviews by independent, international experts in the scientific area of the units. The reports of external reviewers were sent *ipsis verbis* to the coordinators of applying R&D Units, who had the opportunity to comment, reply or clarify objective points put forward by the remote reviewers (rebuttal phase). The reports of the external reviewers and the rebuttal of the R&D unit (if submitted) were brought together and jointly discussed by the evaluation panels. As a result, a consensus report for each unit was produced. The outcome of the evaluation panel meeting was a list of recommended classifications for

the R&D units. Only R&D units that scored above the threshold¹ were selected to proceed to stage 2 of the evaluation process.

The second stage of this process consisted of a site visit to the R&D units followed by a final panel meeting. The result of the final panel meeting was a ranked list of the R&D units and their classification. The regulations and the evaluation guidelines for both stage 1 and stage 2 (site visits) of the evaluation are public (on the FCT website) and were sent to the panel.

In compliance with Portuguese Law and as specified in the Regulations of the Evaluation of R&D Units 2013, all units that were assessed have the right to appeal the recommended decision stated in the panels' consensus reports (preliminary hearing). All the units that are currently complaining already appealed and received a response from the first panel. If unsuccessful in their appeal, R&D units have the further right to a formal complaint. In compliance with the regulations of the call, analysis of the scientific issues underlying the formal complaint is carried out by a second panel of independent experts, who may uphold or modify the original panel decision

The grounds to modify the initial decision are limited to the confirmation of factual errors or major shortcomings of a scientific nature that may have been identified by the unit in the initial assessment and which, furthermore, may not have been appropriately addressed in the preliminary hearings (appeals) analysis.

A complaint is **not a second evaluation** or an additional opportunity for units to present new information that was not included in the application. Panel members should also be aware that a difference of opinion on a scientific issue should not be considered a factual error.

Should any errors or shortcomings indeed be identified, they would need to be acknowledged by the second panel of independent experts and collegially agreed upon by consensus.

2. Methodology

The observations presented by units in the complaints process should be duly substantiated and are carefully reviewed as follows:

- a. By FCT, regarding procedural and administrative issues and/or
- b. By a second panel of independent experts, regarding scientific issues.

All submitted complaints that claim factual errors and shortcomings of a scientific nature need to be examined by a second panel of independent experts.

¹ Only research units with a total mark equal to or above 15 (out of 20) AND with at least 4 (ou of 5) for criteria A and C AND at least 3 (ou of 5) for criteria B and D may classify as exceptional, excellent or very good and therefore shortlisted for Stage 2 (see p.11 of the Evaluation Guide).

Panel members will have full access to all the documents and elements concerning each application.

The second panel of independent experts will have to (1) analyse the complaints submitted by the R&D units. If any factual errors and shortcomings of a scientific nature, which were not properly addressed in the analysis of the preliminary hearings (appeals), are identified, the panel will have to (2) judge the impact of these errors for the overall assessment of the R&D unit. The second panel of independent experts will have access to all existing reviews of all applying R&D units and may seek additional expert advice if needed. Panel members are advised to carefully read all documents associated with the evaluation process as these may provide useful background information for assessing the complains.

The outcome of the analysis by the second panel of independent experts may or may not impact on the final grade of the unit and/or on the unit proceeding to stage 2 of the evaluation (which includes a site visit).

Those units that, as a result of the outcome of the complaint, proceed to stage 2 will be visited by the same panel that visited the other units in the same scientific area. A final recommended grade for the unit will be decided on by this panel, through consensus.

For those units for which the second panel of independent experts recommends a higher grade, but still remain below the threshold to go through to stage 2 (e.g. being upgraded from "Fair" to "Good") or that are upgraded after the site visit (e.g. from "Very Good" to "Excellent") the new grade will also need to be agreed upon by consensus.

The outcome of the complaint will be one of the following:

- The unit maintains its scores and grades. An explanatory comment from the second panel of independent experts is conveyed to the unit;
- The unit passes to stage 2 of the evaluation and thus will be site-visited. An explanatory comment from the second panel of independent experts is conveyed to the unit and a final grade will be agreed upon by the initial panel
- The unit is upgraded to a higher score that does not imply a site visit, because the unit remains below the threshold for stage 2 or because the unit was already visited on stage 2. This will require a reclassification by the second panel, which should take into account the classifications that were attributed by the first panel to all the other units within the same scientific area; an explanatory comment from the second panel is conveyed to the unit.

The result of the complaints procedure **will not have any impact on the other R&D units** and their assessments.

Additionally, and for all submitted complaints, we would ask you to please note that:

- All comments regarding the financial, organisational or regional impact of the evaluation results or any other similar consequences of the outcome are considered administrative and should not be considered by the panel of independent experts;

- Legal issues should not be answered by the panel of independent experts.