Review of Research Units: challenges and lessons learned

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Process Overview

Documentation → 2 Remote reviewers → 2° Rapporteur → Rebuttal → Pre-Meeting report → Panel Meeting → Final Consensus Report (Interactive – involves both rapporteurs and chairs)

(quite similar to UK Research Council Institute reviews)
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<th><strong>Challenges</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Paperwork</strong></td>
<td>Voluminous (from 12-348 pages)</td>
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<td>Repetitious (similar questions asked)</td>
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<td><strong>Time-scale</strong></td>
<td>Reasonable time to read everything</td>
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<td>Short time window for post-Panel reports</td>
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<td><strong>External Reviewers</strong></td>
<td>Identification &amp; securing agreement</td>
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<td>Interpreting comments</td>
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<td><strong>Bibliometrics</strong></td>
<td>Some discrepancies</td>
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<td>Used Elsevier data only interests of consistency</td>
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<td><strong>Disparate Scores</strong></td>
<td>Reviewer to reviewer</td>
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<td>Reviewer to Panel</td>
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<td><strong>Re-structuring</strong></td>
<td>Recent versus established</td>
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<td>Assessment of ‘new’ units.</td>
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## Positive Features of FCT Review

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<th>Details</th>
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| **Well-organised**     | ESF online platform worked superbly  
                          | FCT support at Panels excellent, too (process questions)  
                          | Panel meetings well-timed and supported |
| **Panelists**          | Met ESF & FCT requirements for seniority and experience  
                          | Fully prepared, excellent level of discussion and analysis  
                          | Willing to do more *in situ* |
| **Objectivity**        | Cols declared well in advance  
                          | Few formal links to Portuguese labs, *per se* |
| **Rebuttal Phase**     | Clarification of points of detail  
                          | Correction of mis-conceptions  
                          | Occasional extra information (e.g., on re-structuring plans) |
| **No Fixed Budget**    | Decisions based on merit  
                          | *Not* on declining budget or ‘funds remaining’ |
| **Standardisation**    | General analysis provided by FCT on distribution of units’  
                          | classification  
                          | Allowed some degree of normalisation across panels |
Bibliometrics

Used *only* the Elsevier bibliometric data

- Took a holistic view over the review period
- *Nature* is nice but not the whole story
- Looked for papers in credible journals in the field
- Quality took precedence over quantity
- Not overly focused on journal impact factors
- Treated H-indices and citations with caution
Re-structuring

"We trained hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization."

Gaius Petronius Arbiter, 210 BC

(Actually by Charlton Ogburn Jr in Merrill’s Marauders; the truth about a terrible adventure (1957))

In the Units

Some have re-structured very effectively

Some have good forward plans for re-organisation

Some have unusual governance arrangements

“New” units took different approaches to ‘history’
Disparate Scores

Reviewers

Remote reviewers see only ONE proposal

Everyone has their own suite of “likes and dislikes” that shape a score

Some reviewers are unrealistically harsh

Panelists

Saw a minimum of 6 proposals each in detail; full spectrum

Interpret reviews (a “5” with lots of critical points is not a “5”)

Interpret rebuttal (immensely important; generally positive and helpful)

Discuss points of difference openly; other panelists contribute

Agreement reached by all contributors.
The cut-off for a site visit was 15.

What happened to proposals scoring 14 (4, 3, 4, 3) or those scoring 15 but as 4,4,3,4?

Some identified early (pre-meeting reports), others at meeting

Reviewed ‘overnight’ by another ‘new’ panel member (P3 & P7)

Re-discussed in full Panel with ‘benefit of doubt’ in mind

FCT supported maximising number of units to be site visited

Some proposals were re-scored to 15, others remained at 14

In short, read by six different individuals
### What did we learn? A mini-SWOT analysis

#### STRENGTHS
- Strong units across the country
- Some truly world-class centres
- **Strong Leadership**
- **Multi-disciplinarity**
- Excellent M.Sc / PhD programmes
- Very fine outreach programmes
- Internationalisation

#### WEAKNESSES
- Some units not competitive, alas
- **Wide performance levels within units**
- Opaque strategy and forward plans
- **Multi-disciplinarity**
- Mixed success with EU funding
- Limited networks
- Unclear budget arrangements

#### OPPORTUNITIES
- Facilities sharing
- EU resources
- Broader networks
- **Succession planning**
- Wider links via alumni
- National Centres of Excellence

#### THREATS
- Resource restriction
- **Variation in performance levels**
- **Strong leadership**
- Governance fitness for purpose
- Lack of success with EU applications
Site Visits

Coming soon... (coordinated and implemented by FCT with ESF support on logistics and operation)

• Panel members are looking forward to seeing round the units, meeting the teams and hearing more about the science

• Engage positively

• Some outline questions will appear on consensus reports; others will arise on the day

• Some Panels will ask for a local “SWOT” analysis; that would be helpful

• Some Panels would like to meet PhD / Post-doc students to hear their views on training programmes

• Ask for feedback; these are discussions, not monologues

• Ask for assistance (e.g., identifying advisory board members)
Conclusions

Review worked well

Documentation was challenging for all

All applications got a fair, positive hearing, especially at ’borderlines’

Outcomes are robust

>50% of units will be site visited

There is good science being done across the nation

There are centres that are genuinely world-leading

Training programmes are excellent

Portuguese Science is fine shape and getting stronger