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# BEYOND METRICS: THE CRISIS OF ACADEMIC QUALITY IN PORTUGAL

## PARA ALÉM DAS MÉTRICAS: A CRISE DA QUALIDADE ACADÉMICA EM PORTUGAL

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In the rapidly evolving landscape of academic research, the criteria for evaluating academic productivity have changed significantly over the past few decades. This transformation has been catalyzed, in part, by state policy decisions that prioritize bibliometric indicators, thereby influencing the research behaviors of higher education faculty. In Portugal, the agreements initiated with the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) and later consolidated through the collective acquisition of access to Scopus by the European Union (EU), a database of reference abstracts and citations, have drastically reshaped academic incentives and practices. Although these contracts were ostensibly designed to enhance the visibility and international competitiveness of Portuguese research, they have produced unintended consequences that challenge the core values of meaningful academic contribution.

Agreements with reference databases appeared to have had a greater influence on the increment of academic productivity and, accordingly, enhancement of the importance of research, particularly for capacity building, research centers, and patent production. For countries with less strong performances, such as Portugal, the conclusion was a need to work for people-based excellence by investing in world-class universities and research centers. Nevertheless, the truth that has emerged is a far cry from best intentions, and instead, the story of a set of poorly thought-through measures that have seriously weakened the very good that these ventures set out to do.

In the academic research environment, the standard metric to measure academic productivity has drastically evolved over the past decades. This shift was driven by policy decisions at the state level to favor bibliometric indicators, and it has reordered the research activity of higher education faculty. This leads to an academic setting where the fetishism around database metrics replaces actual scholarly quality with systematic mediocrity.

Portugal's academic examination journey shows how vast the chasm between policy intentions and reality can be. According to European productivity reports, Portugal is consistently ranked among countries with relatively low performance in certain areas, notably in scientific and technological research quality. In 2010, Portugal received a score of only 26.5 on the composite research excellence indicator; this is significantly below the EU-27 average of 47.9. Weaknesses of the country included being "relatively mediocre in top--cited publications (59, UMCU only one in top 10%),. Portugal had "no world-class universities/research institutions among global top 250", and "critically low-quality patent originations (score 13) combined with just reaso-

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nable in ERC grants (65)".

These statistics opened the eyes of Portuguese policymakers to record sharing as a game-changing strategy. The deals with ISI in the early 2000s, and later SCOPUS access through larger European purchases, were understood to be groundbreaking initiatives that would democratize international journal access and foster participation in global academic dialogues. State investment in such resources was justified as correcting both visibility deficits and the alleged ossification of traditional academic cultures. But instead of fostering real quality, they have fostered what must be called an academic inflation crisis. Scalar quantification, combined with the instantaneous and comprehensive introduction of quantitative measures, along with the state and EU's acquisition of competing models on the same basis, has led to a profound recalibration of academic citizenship, which has now completely undermined the integrity of scholarship.

## The Mechanics of Academic Inflation

Perhaps nowhere has the transformation of Portuguese academia been more evident than in the rise of so-called "publication factories", that is, research units organized to maximize combined citation footprints rather than advance understanding. These quasi-factories of production depersonalize the writing and publishing process, spreading authorship more broadly among members. As a result, 'individual faculty may produce upwards of 100 papers a year' by repeatedly recycling methods and doing slight variants of existing work. For one, it has cemented a range of deeply troubling practices, namely:

*Fragmentation Systematically*: PhD work, which usually leads to integrated, complete monographs, is broken artificially into several hardly communicating mini-monographs. The "thesis by articles" format has been transformed from a format with integrity to one that prioritizes collaboration, breaking down the subject into smaller parts and allowing supervisors and students to pool their knowledge.

*Tactical Co-authorship Webs*: The expansion of co-authorships that are more hallmarks of publication strategy than of substantive contributions. Supervisors routinely embed themselves into work where they contribute relatively little (and become overpowering presences), and doctoral students are co-opted onto side projects in which they are given the opportunity to appear authorial, but solely so that publications become more abundant.

*The Salami Slicing Epidemic*: Research results, which may represent significant single additions to the knowledge base, are divided into small pieces and published as separate papers, resulting in an apparent abundance of output while diminishing its overall impact.

Most insidious of all is how it has transformed the norms and mechanics of academic assessment. The demand for an increase in the number of indexed publications has, in fact, led to a vicious circle as demonstrated by the following indicators of the degradation of academic standards:

*Systematic Devaluation of Pedagogical Excellence*: The core function of academics, teaching, is demoted to secondary. Recruitment, promotion, and tenure decisions increasingly are predicated on SCOPUS-listed publication counts, not evidence of pedagogical skill or broad content understanding. Veteran professors often abandon classroom discussions and curriculum decisions to prioritize publications.

*Research Agendas are Led by Metrics*: Topics are not chosen for scientific or social good but by what is easy to publish and can get cited. This dynamic favors incremental research that scratches the surface of saturated research areas over bold, albeit high-risk, studies that could offer real progress.

*Quantitative Evaluation is All that Counts*: The division of academic labor (teaching on one side; publishing on the other) has obli-

terated comprehensive assessments of scholarly performance. Changing the course of one's career largely depends on the realization of database-indexed output, which is often incentivized to be a contest of gaming the system rather than producing new knowledge.

The most damning evidence of the system's collapse lies in its central paradox over the last two decades. Portuguese research has exponentially multiplied publications, yet the country has proven to practice tangible stagnation in theoretical innovation and practical impact. There are several signs that this is the grim truth:

*Theoretical Emancipation*: The most stressful demand to produce content may have obliterated either a room for extended theoretical contemplation or risky papers. Young researchers frequently express frustration about being compelled to abandon ambitious theoretical programs in favor of short-term, easily publishable projects that yield little contribution to the accumulation of knowledge.

*Methodological Uniformization*: The requirement for researchers to publish in indexed journals to gain recognition has led to a methodological and thematic uniformization, limiting diversity and creativity in national knowledge production. Original research lines are increasingly being abandoned in favor of fashionable approaches that ensure publication in key journals.

*Loss of International Recognition*: These distortions have become increasingly visible in the international scientific community, making the higher number of publications in Portuguese institutions more and more dubious. In this direction, some institutions and science journalists are starting to feel the need to enforce tighter standards that also aim to filter duplicated or redundant material, possibly marginalizing Portuguese research.

Apart from the impact on quality research, this system has brought a deep ethical crisis to Portuguese universities. Mass-producing repetitive articles corrodes the ethical framework on which scientific research is based. When getting published is separated from the active creation of new knowledge, we remove the social and intellectual legitimacy of the whole undertaking. Moreover, the crisis is multi-dimensional as indicated by the following issues:

*Research Misconduct Normalization*: Traditionally, unethical behaviors such as excessive data fragmentation, redundant publication, and strategic authorship inflation have been seen as unacceptable. However, these have become rationalized under institutional pressures. For example, research center directors tend to become co-authors simply due to their status, rather than for their contributions to the documents being produced.

The Hemorrhaging of the Young: Young researchers are being socialized in this culture of metric productivity, learning to value quantity over quality and to lose the ability to produce genuinely original research. This is the idea of academic formation that is utterly failing and has harmful long-term effects. Sometimes, the pedagogical aspect of academic and scientific training is overlooked by teachers, leading to inflated grades for students at the end of the semester, which can keep them satisfied. In fact, these grades do not reflect real levels of acquired knowledge. Consequently, it is doubtful that higher education institutions are, indeed, producing scholars with levels of excellence that they tend to affirm politically.

*Erosion of Public Trust*: The chasm between published output and real added value to the state's knowledge base is increasingly visible, and attitudes to investment in academic research as a public good are systematically whittled away.

## Towards Real Reform: Six Key Elements of a Blueprint

Dealing with these systemic issues calls for a complete overhaul, not just some touch-up

work on the process currently used to evaluate teachers. A few key links seem critical:

*Integrating Qualitative Judgments*: Senior reviews of teaching and research that take account of narrative portfolios and evidence of teaching and its originality/impact. Although costly, such an approach would restore balance to the reductionism of current measures.

*Publication Limits and Quality Thresholds*: Setting maximum publication limits for each person to be evaluated during the outing; instead, it is about ensuring quality thresholds that encourage people to improve their work, rather than focusing on the numbers game of publishing. This will, however, necessitate concurrent reform in funding and promotion systems to prevent early-career researchers from being penalized. The reality is that those dedicated to quality teaching are, indeed, penalized due to having fewer published articles. However, these faculty are the adequate assurance for excellence in academic and scientific training.

*Recognition Expanded to Include Scholarly Contribution*: Relegitimization of monographs, theoretical treatises, pedagogical innovation, and public engagement as legitimate forms of academic work. This variety would revalue what is slow and reflective in processes fundamental to robust scientific progressivity.

*Transforming Institutional Culture*: Establish reward systems that truly begin to value teaching excellence, mentorship, and collaborative scholarship as much as research productivity. It entails radical reforms in recruitment, selection mechanisms, and appraisal measures.

International Collaboration and Standards: Collaborating with European and global partners to develop evaluation systems that drive true excellence rather than gaming. This entails encouraging database providers to establish quality checks to prevent redundant publication.

## CONCLUSION

### Reclaiming Academic Integrity

The Portuguese case of evaluation-supported benefits is a lesson about how well-meaning policies can, sometimes, lead to systemically adverse effects. The illusory dream of international visibility and competitiveness has indeed been achieved, but only in the most shallow and improbable of all forms, with Portuguese institutions now supplying the global research community with dazzling numbers of publications that mask a very real crisis in academic honesty and intellectual fertility.

The way forward is to recognize that real excellence is not quantifiable, and sustainable academic success is built on cultures where depth trumps breadth, originality trumps conformity, and long-term learning trumps short-term productivity. Only through drastic reform of assessment systems will Portuguese academia be able to fulfill its basic role of producing and communicating knowledge for both the delectation of the mind and the good of society. The stakes are as high as they get. If there is no decisive intervention to reverse these trends, Portugal will be condemning itself to a higher education system characterized by systematic mediocrity, where resources, talent, and the potential for contribution to science and social progress are squandered. Instead of fostering genuine merit, the current trajectory risks privileging the formation of internal cliques among staff, whose primary function is to reinforce numerical support for those in positions of institutional power. The decision is simple: either implement real reform that rewards scholastic excellence and integrity, or institutionalize academic inflation and patronage networks, which serve neither truth nor the broader community.