

Reflections on my visit to CIDTFF – 18-20 June 2013-06-21

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In my report in 2012, I commented on ‘content’, i.e. the many kinds of processes and outcomes the Centre has produced, and in particular on ways in which the Centre might develop an international reputation, respond to the globalisation of higher education, and consider in what ways its research meets economic and social demands in society. These are still relevant points but during this visit I have learnt much more about the financing of the Centre in the past and in what is likely to be the future. In order to remain a centre of excellence and compete, the Centre will need to respond to globalisation etc in ways which fit the likely financial future. I have therefore concentrated here and in comments over the three days on financial matters as the framework for thinking about future development of ‘content’.

The past and current situation

In the past, the basic/core budget from FCT has been allocated – on the basis of the number of PhD students – with a freedom to use it as professional judgment (and perhaps personal research interests of individuals) suggested. The processes and outcomes from this budget have been complemented by grants for projects, usually within an existing area of study, and therefore coherent with professional judgement. This has been a successful strategy as previous evaluations of ‘excellence’ indicate.

The future situation

Although it is not yet definite, the future basic/core budget from FCT is likely to be calculated on the basis of the number of highly rated researchers who are defined as members of the Centre. The definition of ‘highly rated’ may not yet be clear¹. The basic/core budget will however be reduced, not least because the overall budget for university research will be less due to the economic crisis. Another source of finance from FCT will be for projects i.e. either original ideas which are funded, or in successful responses to calls for research. (If this scenario is correct, it will increase competitiveness since there will be two competitions: for core funding and for additional funding.)

If this scenario is correct – or something like it – it will affect the decisions about what ideas to pursue. Instead of them being based solely on professional judgement, they will to a

¹ One option would be to use rating system as it exists elsewhere –e.g. in UK or France – to make preliminary ratings.

greater or lesser degree be based on societal demands (as expressed in calls for research or in more general statements about what are societal research needs and what are the functions of universities in the contemporary world.)

One effect on individuals and groups of financing by competitive projects will be to require them to be responsive (often at short notice) to opportunities to write proposals. These will be related to their central interests and expertise hitherto but not necessarily at the heart of those interests, and the help of the centre's technicians to identify opportunities will be crucial as it will in helping with the writing of proposals².

Another effect – this time from the reduction in basic/core budget – will be the reduction in opportunity to carry out what is professionally desirable – and may include innovative ideas not yet perceived as needed in society – and what has been hitherto central to an individual's or a group's researcher identity.

Researcher profiles

Hitherto the profiles or 'researcher identities' of individuals or groups within the Centre have largely been defined by themselves. They may in future have to modify their identities/profiles to meet the demands of the new situation. On the other hand, provided there is sufficient basic/core funding, there could be/ought to be space for the development of ideas and profiles which are not simply responding to the current trends and demands but are innovative/imaginative. The Centre should find a way of 'picking future winners' and investing in them even if their ideas are not fashionable, and are 'outside the box'.

Young researchers

The Centre has had a splendid history of developing new researchers through 'apprenticing' them to the more experienced, and through attaching them to existing research developments/projects. (There is however a question whether this also pushes these young researchers into existing trends and fashions instead of the Centre looking to them for the 'outside the box' ideas.)

In future, because of the reduced basic/.core funding most young researchers (PhD and post-doc) will have to be financed by project money, and this will probably mean fewer people. The Centre will have to decide if it can invest basic/core funding in PhD students with outstanding potential – again 'picking winners'.

Strategies and tactics

² The writing of proposals is a genre which needs to be learnt and the Centre needs to think about how it can help people to learn this. It should be part, too, of the training of young researchers.

If the scenario sketched above is correct and since it is known that FCT wants to promote a discourse of a Centre having a single conceptual approach or ‘programme’ within which its many individuals and groups research coherently, it seems necessary as we said on Thursday afternoon to write a strategy paper which presents the ways in which current and foreseeable social change (we mentioned multiculturalism, ageing, digitalisation but there are surely others) can be seen as ultimately driving the specific research of groups and individuals. Demonstrating how all the Centre’s planned research directions are coherent with societal change is an important strategy. It is a pragmatic approach but one which is also principled since university research as a moral obligation today to meet societal demands – both those which society is aware of now and those which are only on the horizon – or even beyond the horizon.

At the same time, the Centre might develop its tactics to further build its international reputation. It needs to be known internationally for specific specialisms, as I said in my report of 2012. Reputations are built *inter alia* by running conferences, holding invitation seminars, editing books, since such activities bring into focus and make visible what articles scattered in journals do not (although this is not to say that journal articles are not important since they clearly are). Unfortunately this would mean more emphasis on work in English.

Finally

I am very aware that my understanding of both past and future could be flawed. If I have got things wrong in detail (or even in general) I hope this will be forgiven and that nonetheless my reflections will stimulate productive discussion.

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