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MESSAGE FROM THE VICE-RECTOR



We are celebrating fifty years of this successful journey we call UA. And so it seems appropriate to look back while keeping our sights on the journey ahead, the uncharted paths, the thrills of knowledge creation and use, and the challenges we jointly face.

It all started not long before the April revolution, and way before Portugal entered the European Economic Community. Then, hard borders were the norm, mobility was reduced, information was difficult to access, resources were scarce, personal computer power was yet to be unlocked, and the World Wide Web was still fifteen years away.

The very first doctorates were awarded by UA in 1980. By comparison, more than two hundred were awarded in the last academic year alone, one third of which concerning non-Portuguese students from 22 nationalities. A structural change resulting from nation-wide scholarship programs, such as Ciência and Praxis XXI, internal UA scholarship programs, and the attractiveness of the research, teaching, and ambiance at UA.

This structural change also impacted the teaching and research careers. To create the UA, staff with different paths were brought in. Their doctorates have been obtained at other national, and often international, universities, and they were simultaneously the teachers and the only researchers at UA. And this was so for quite a few years.

Today, teaching and research careers coexist at UA, and it is possible to make the whole career at a single institution. Additionally, the pace of transformation greatly accelerated in recent years, fostered by national scientific employment policies. The number of researchers at UA multiplied by 4.5 in the last decade, reaching 521 researchers in 2023, and representing 19% of UA's total staff.

Needless to say, the management of such a diverse workforce requires a different approach, encompassing the attraction of outstanding professionals, the retention of the best, the recognition and valorization of individual performance, and improved group dynamics.

All of this may be extended to the research support staff. Along this line, there has been a reinforcement of support structures in recent years, both at central and research unit level. Furthermore, a Science & Technology manager career has been created, now counting with circa thirty staff dedicated solely to science management activities.

In terms of organization, the structures are now larger and more diverse. From small research groups with limited funding, back in

the 1970's, to a core of more than twenty research units at UA, some with the statute of Associated Laboratory. All of them were rated Excellent or Very Good in the last national research assessment exercise. It is worth noting that a new national research assessment exercise is now ongoing, and while expecting fair recognition of the work that has been done, we will make good use of this renewed external look to project the future.

Late generation equipment and infrastructure is another fundamental pillar for doing research at the forefront, requiring a significant and recurring investment. This remains a pressing need that should be addressed at the system level. Unfortunately, there are no regular scientific reequipment programs. Furthermore, the aperiodic nature, in practice, of the evaluation of the research units, the reliance on short-term project-based funding, and the shortcomings in the funding of universities, makes it a hard-to-solve problem. This is further compounded by the increasing demand for adequate data infrastructures, compatible with high information volume, access and computational speed, appropriate safeguards, data protection, and cybersecurity.

In this context, we have been relying on strategic choices, attraction of funds, and allocation of centralized funds coupled with internal cost sharing mechanisms. As an example, we were able to inaugurate the Portuguese Centre for Nuclear Magnetic Resonance in our main campus, just a couple of months ago.

We must make the most of what we have at our disposal, by perfecting management, increasing sharing, and complementing investments within different research units and different projects. Collaboration, articulation, and coordination are paramount. And this will be the focus for the Research Institute, a new structure foreseen under the revision of UA's statutes.

Many other aspects of this first half century could have been highlighted, such as the creation of a yearly award to the best researcher, promoting recognition and enhancing visibility, the hosting of grants from the European Research Council and ERA-Chair, the coordination of European projects, highly cited researchers, or the recent UA contributions under the Recovery and Resilience Plan.

All this has been made possible through the dedication of so many throughout this past half century. Much more will be made possible by those at UA today, and by those that will join the journey.