External Evaluation Report

Research Unit: Centre for Research in Applied Communication, Culture, and New Technologies (CICANT)
Host Institution: Universidade Lusófona
Dates of Visit: 6 and 7 October

External Evaluation Board Members:
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1. Executive Summary

The External Advisory Board found that CICANT continues to be a dynamic, intellectually open, and highly productive research centre with a distinctive profile at the intersection of communication, culture, and new technologies. The visit confirmed the strong commitment of staff, the quality and relevance of ongoing projects, and the centre's impressive capacity for societal engagement through participatory and arts-based approaches. CICANT displays a healthy and growing research culture, which motivates researchers, with strong leadership, and a flat organisational ethos that encourages initiative and collaboration.

Key strengths include:

➜ **High-quality, diverse research and creative practice**, combining theoretical depth with practice-based innovation; this blend is emerging as a distinctive feature of CICANT and should be further developed in our eyes.

➜ **Competent, trusted leadership** that fosters a collegial and agency-rich environment driven by open communication and a culture of respect.

➜ **A strong structural foundation** through the ReLeCOS and Labs, which supports both strategic coherence and bottom-up innovation.

➜ **A highly engaged community of PhD students and early career researchers**, who demonstrate commitment and self-organisation.

➜ **Exceptional societal and cultural engagement**, nationally and internationally, with many projects making tangible policy, community, and cultural impact.

➔ **A diverse team and an intellectually open culture**, making CICANT an attractive environment for researchers, both nationally and internationally, in all phases of their careers.

Recommendations for future progress:

➔ **Greater clarity of structure and roles** within and between the ReLeCOS and Labs, including more transparent procedures for establishing, evaluating, and funding labs. Emphasising clarity on the relation between innovation and funding will contribute to clarity of structures and roles.

➔ **A clearer overarching narrative** to strengthen CICANT's identity internally and externally, and to articulate its distinctive contribution. This, we feel, is an urgent matter. A narrative should not be a statement of closed identity but nevertheless will play an important role in further developing a sense of purpose and belonging.

➔ **More explicit support for staff development**, including career pathways, researcher development frameworks, and internal support for publications, grants, and internationalisation. This is also an urgent requirement and applies across the career trajectory of researchers, from PhD to senior levels.

➔ **A need to better integrate early career researchers and self-funded PhD students**, and to align training provision across doctoral programmes. Here we notices that ECRs and Doctoral Researchers voiced an explicit desire for more intensive theoretical training.

➔ **Strengthening EDI strategies**, including clearer commitments, representation, onboarding practices, and support mechanisms. EDI also needs to be clearly communicated and exemplified by leadership.

➔ **Expanded support for outreach and communication**, avoiding over-reliance on single points of outreach/initiative and embedding outreach as part of the research process across the piece.

Overall, the Board has strong confidence in CICANT's capacity for continued excellence and innovation. With clearer strategic framing, strengthened support structures, and sustained investment in internationalisation, CICANT is well-positioned to consolidate and enhance its role as a leading research centre in communication, culture, and new technologies within Portugal and internationally.

2. Leadership and Strategic Direction

Structures

- The overall core structure, with the ReLeCOS and Labs, works well.
- Also the thematic focus of the 3 ReLeCOS is good, covering relevant large academic fields, without too much overlap
- The Labs offer ample room for adaptability and innovation
- The thematic differences between the 3 ReLeCos could be made clearer and simplified, so as to create a stronger narrative of what is (to be) achieved by, and within the remit of, each ReLeCOS.

Leadership and vision

- CICANT's leadership team is competent and engaged; they are respected and trusted by the CICANT members

- The organisation is quite "flat", which stimulates agency, initiative and exchange

- The leadership team will benefit from increased and possibly reorganised support structure.

- The vision of the centre has the strong points of linking theory to practice, committing to a clear societal agenda and focusing action on consolidation CICANT's place in the national research landscape. More attention could be paid to the overarching narrative, in order to increase identity and belonging, as well as integration of the three locations.

Recommendations for future progress:

Structure

- The exact roles of ReLeCOS and Labs need to be more clearly outlined, protecting the coordination role of the ReLeCOS, and the activity role of the Labs; There is a need to avoid bypassing the ReLeCOS, but also to explicitly build flexibility into the structure, to be able to respond to a changing environment quickly.
- Membership of a ReLeCO without Lab membership should remain possible, even when it's not ideal. Depending on the funding structure for the labs, it might be worth emphasising a main membership of one Lab and secondary and third possible membership of others, enabling people to still participate in activities even if it's not their main Lab.
- Change the visual representation of the structure with (1) the ReLeCOS (as community) at the basis of the structure, (2) feeding the Labs (in the middle) and (3) the ReLoCO coordinators above them might offer a better representation. Visualize those Labs who work in 2 or more ReLeCOS (but ensure that labs also have one home)
- Need for clear procedures on how to establish and maintain Labs
  - Develop calls for candidates, preferably combining a call for earmarked Lab themes ("who wishes to establish a lab on theme x") with open calls ("who wishes to establish a new Lab within one of the ReLeCOS);

- o Proposals responding to a particular call should always include a clear action plan with planned activities and targets, which needs to be evaluated after a pre-defined period (e.g., 2 years);
  - o New Labs should always go through a first trial period (which is close to the current so-called "pop-up labs"), but all Labs should be regularly evaluated to see whether they have reached their targets.
- Link Labs more directly to funding streams, and have clear budgets for Labs, but at the same time ensure the responsible use of resources, linked to targets (but also allow for set-backs, surprises, diversions, …)
- Create a clear(er) line management structure, involve line managers in 'higher' decision-making levels but simultaneously ensure transversal connections
- Protect the personalised support structure but formalize what can be formalized (e.g., ensure that there are clear procedures for individual requests for budgets)
- Invest in the new partner in Vila Real, and in the new ReLoCO SUST-Media, but also ensure that other entities gain sufficient support to facilitate their sustained growth
- Create a new layer (or dimension) in the structure with 'bubbles' (or 'cells'), for instance for theory, where all CICANT staff can collaborate and develop initiatives; these entities can then develop into (internal) centres of expertise

Leadership
- Develop conflict management procedures for the leadership structures (including those in the 7-member board), while protecting the informal and consensus-centred management styles

Identity and community

- Create an overarching narrative, keeping in mind that no narrative can never be complete and all-encompassing. The narrative should both encompass the existing strengths of CICANT, while also outlining directions for the future.
  - o Find ways to ensure that CICANT members know and communicate the main narrative to the outside world, without requiring total identification with (and without being absorbed by) the overarching narrative
  - o Make CICANT members show off more

3. Research and Creative Practice Output

Staff

- Overall, CICANT's staff appears happy and engaged
- There is a need for clearer career pathways and a more explicit framework for the development of Early Career Researchers, while also addressing career development across all stages of the research career
- Many staff members identify primarily with their units, which is valuable for their work. However, it is important to CICANT's aims that staff have a clear understanding of, and remain sufficiently connected to the CICANT research umbrella. This will require increased human and material support. This applies in particular also to the task of integrating the three locations.

Research

- The CICANT research is diverse and rich, which should be celebrated

- The projects we have seen are relevant and of high quality. Many incorporate the fusion of theory and practice and address the wider societal and cultural context. There is a healthy balance of arts-based research and more traditional approaches in humanities and social sciences, with clear examples of cross-fertilisation of these approaches.

- Many projects are both theoretically as well as practically very strong and this seems to be a particular feature of CICANT, which might become an element in the overarching narrative. There seems to be a keenly felt need for a more institutionalised approach to the theory side of research (see above).

Recommendations for future progress:

Staff

- Continue protecting the (academic) freedom of the researchers, and their collaborations, while better legitimating the importance and opportunities of CICANT's structures
- Create internal coherence through generating more opportunities for staff members
- Develop an even stronger research culture, through a strengthening of support (both administrative but also internal peer-reviewing) to 1) publication processes targeting international journals, 2) research funding application processes, 3) support for international conference participation and a researcher development framework
- Consider a stronger place of Open Access in the outputs policy, and consider the place and function of concordats such as DORA in this context
- New profiles/staff
  o Link part of the new profiles/staff to the ReLoCO themes, to strengthen the ReLoCOs, and allow at the same time for other new profiles/staff to fulfil more particular needs
  o Involve the ReLoCOS in developing those particular profiles
  o Formulate transversal criteria for each new staff category (e.g., theory driven capacities, outreach capacities, international connectedness)
  o Consider reserving a proportion of the new profiles/staff positions for non-Portuguese academics
  o Consider working more with visiting (professor) positions/stays/residences, to intensify the internationalization within CICANT
  o Foreground the understanding of CICANT when on-boarding new staff and support their engagement with other CICANT researchers and their work

Evaluation

- The shift away from quantification is appreciated, but there is the need to ensure that objectives remain clear and can be evaluated
- Make sure that all staff members understand what the minimum expectations are
- Be wise about what excellence is, keeping in mind that excellence cannot be absorbed by problematic quality rankings. Allow academics to explain why their work is excellent
- Lobby for the acceptance and validation of artistic (and arts-based) research in formal evaluation processes, locally, nationally and internationally.

4. Postgraduate and Early Career Researcher Support

- Both PhD students and ECRs communicate interest, basic satisfaction and commitment
- Their projects (as far as we can tell) seem relevant
- There is considerable support for their work (with a level of hick-ups that can be considered normal)
- There is a degree of self-organisation, which is highly appreciated
- Strategies exist for post-graduate and early career participation in initiatives such as international research partnerships.
- Supervision experiences that the Board heard about from speaking with Phd students and ECRs are, on the whole, positive.

Recommendations for future progress:

Identity and community

- Improve mechanisms to better support and integrate the self-financed PhDs
- Create meeting points for senior colleagues (and not only for early-stage scholars)
- Further support the ESR network and its activities

Training

- Attempt to align the different PhD programmes more (as, for instance, the difference in ECTS for the training program in Porto and Lisboa is substantial), and focus courses on support of the PhD research projects

Researcher Development

- Develop an explicit framework for researcher development, including, but not limited to, ECRs. The framework should address all aspects of the research career, including: i.a., publishing, funding, career progression (e.g. to becoming a P.I. and managing a larger grant), and well-being.

5. Societal and Cultural Engagement

- CICANT has a high level of capacity to engage with non-academic worlds, and the willingness to do so
- CICANT has an impressive number of collaborators in many of the projects, and the researchers value the impact they have on policy level and with the arts-based approaches
- Its bottom-up/participatory approaches make the centre unique and could be emphasised more in external communication
- There are many high-impact projects and outputs with societal and cultural engagement both in the national and international context
- These strengths can be pillars of research visibility and partnership building

Recommendations for future progress
- Continue to value the collaboration of stakeholders internally, but also in the early-career development plans, and in the setting up and evaluation of Labs.
- Continue to build strong partnerships with external actors, especially on the international level
- Emphasise the unique position of CICANT externally and in the overall narrative on the work that CICANT is doing
- Consider connecting social and cultural engagement with EDI in the 2025-2029 plan

<u>Support and outreach</u>

- Expand the support structure, e.g., for outreach activities and resources for communicating these activities internally and externally
  - Ensure that CICANT staff further develops its outreach skills, and allow for knowledge sharing between staff
  - Continue to communicate the impact and outreach activities, nationally and internationally
  - Avoid creating one outreach position who is then responsible for all CICANT outreach; outreach support needs to stimulate CICANT staff to engage in outreach activities
  - Ensure that outreach is not only focussed on the field of policy but includes, for instance, community engagement, knowledge exchange with private and public sector organisations, strengthening of the civic role of the university, and widening participation and public science communication.
  - Ensure that outreach is integrated in research, and not a linear process with outreach at the end

6. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

Intellectual openness is an acknowledged characteristic of CICANT, which is diverse across the ReLeCOS and within Labs, particularly for gender. This is evident in thematic approaches, and broadly in publication and other presentations of ongoing work and research outcomes. There is potential to develop a variable model for EDI considerations during literary review and source selections, including the manner in which conclusions and projections for future work are expressed. This would acknowledge the place of EDI in ethical practice without separate, prescribed procedures, and establish a framework for addressing future challenges and opportunities of AI in research.

The declaration in the next strategic plan of CICANT's commitment to monitoring and supporting representation of people of color and other minorities is encouraged. Embedded and sustained equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives with measurable outcomes will contribute to diversity in the pool of researchers and students attracted to CICANT. A development of a specified EDI strategy will extend CICANT's visibility and be valuable in the establishment and growth of international collaborations.

More in detail:

- The team is diverse but not fragmented in its thematic approaches
- Also at the level of socio-demographics we can see a very diverse group (in particular when it comes to gender), although a stronger representation of people of colour might further strengthen the internal diversity
- CICANT is characterized by an intellectual openness, which renders it a good working place
- A clear statement of commitment to, and leadership strategy for, EDI across CICANT will be beneficial.
- Consider EDI in outputs such as published papers. This could take a range of forms from approaches to literary review and source selections, to the manner in which conclusions and projections for future work are expressed.
- EDI management is important in the CICANT exploration of international visibility and impact. Ensure that EDI is embedded in strategy and refined for specific contexts and partnerships.
- Consider the role of CICANT as an innovator for ethical, principled EDI in research. This is a complex and urgent topic as AI evolution and its rate of deployment in research continue to outpace predictions. (There is considerable work on this topic in Brazil.)
- Ensure that EDI policy and practice guidance are provided to researchers when they join CICANT
- Clarify where and how EDI is placed and addressed in the teaching programmes

Recommendations for future progress:

Staff

- Ensure that new staff and PhD students obtain access to all basic information (e.g., a welcome pack, a peer-mentor, etc.)
- Ensure the inclusion of EDI considerations explicitly in research and teaching (decolonising curricula, EDI paragraph in research proposals, etc.)
- Consider establishing / further developing an ombudsperson role
- Better develop (access to) mental health support (some initiatives exist, but appear not to be widely known)
- Develop an explicit framework for career development support, mentoring and coaching, also demonstrating the existence of career perspectives outside CICANT (and outside Lusofona, and outside Portugal)

7. Final Remarks and Future Outlook

The board was impressed by the high level of work done at CICANT and the progress made in consolidating the Centre as a highly visible and respected fixture in the Portuguese research landscape, with a clear presence internationally as well. Financially and in terms of its embedding in the wider University, CICANT is also in a healthy place.

Leadership exhibited awareness of strategic issues around identity, mechanisms for the development and funding of research projects and larger research structures and was open to contemplate the dynamic development of existing structures to ensure the Centre remains well-adapted to developments in the field and in society. CICANT addresses vital issues in contemporary society, impacting well-being as well as the future of democratic institutions.

Everyone contributing to the success of the centre is to be commended with the quality of the work they are doing.

Recommendations for future progress:

We do not want to repeat here what was said above in various places already. We do want to invite the Centre to consider our recommendations and make them part of the planning process. We look forward to continuing to work with students, staff and leadership and are especially looking forward to site visits to, and participation in seminars at, the other CICANT locations. Integration of the three sites, to conclude, will be one of the key drivers of future success for the centre.