Report of the Scientific Committee of the Paris School of Economics


The meeting started with a presentation of the PSE project, followed by a presentation and a discussion of the plans for the general economics programs and for four of the professional/multidisciplinary specialized programs. This report will follow the same order.

The Scientific Committee is enthusiastic about the overall project. France in general, and Paris in particular, do not have the visibility in either research or in teaching of economics that they could and should achieve.

The talent base is clearly there. Paris, at large, has a large number of world-class economists. It also has a pool of outstanding students. There is enough talent to potentially create one or two internationally top ranked economics departments. Yet, this potential has not been achieved, in large part due to the division of researchers across too many research centers and the weak relation of these research centers to advanced teaching programs.

In this light, the PSE project, if it leads to a better integration of the research groups, and a better integration of research and teaching, is of great value. We are extremely impressed with what has been put in motion so far, and by the hard work and vision of Roger Guesnerie, Thomas Piketty, Antoine d’Autume, and Daniel Cohen. While some of our comments below point to potential weaknesses of some of these incipient programs, this should not detract from our main conclusion: This is the most exciting, and, for economics, potentially the most important project ever to come along in France (here, it is only fair to mention the path breaking work of Jean Jacques Laffont and his team in Toulouse. This project will build on their lessons).

1. The two general economics programs.

We shall start with a few general remarks, and then turn to the particulars of each of the two programs.
While it would have been better to start with one rather than with two PhD programs, we understand the constraints coming from initial conditions, and we think that the two-programs option is probably viable. The goal however should be to achieve a steadily closer integration of the two programs.

This leads to a practical suggestion. While master (M1 and M2) teaching is likely to remain separate for some time to come, it may make sense, as soon as space is available, to have all the thesis writers in the same place—presumably in the new building at Jourdan. This would send a clear message that the two programs are part of the same structure, would allow for interactions between the two groups of students, and would facilitate further integration of the two programs in the future.

The other suggestion is less important, but nevertheless relevant. We (the SC) were overwhelmed by the number of acronyms used to describe the various institutions, and the various players. This obviously reflects the legacy of the past, but it is essential that this disappears. Students should probably know of only two acronyms, PSE-Jourdan, and PSE-Paris 1. All public documents should, to the extent feasible, do the same.

1.1. PSE-Jourdan.

We see this program as being, for the time being, the flagship program of PSE. It already exists, has a well organized curriculum, strong students, and a strong faculty.

More can be done however, and the question is whether the transformation should be gradual or more discontinuous. Some of the SC members argued in favor of a discontinuous approach, for example by reducing the size of the program to increase the average student level. The majority of the SC thought however that the current strategy, based on a decentralized structure of limited-term research chairs, each chair being responsible for an improvement in the quality of research and teaching in a specific field, was a good and realistic approach.

Our main worry was the lack of clear rules for faculty appointments to, and removals from, the program. Who (and what committee) will decide on new appointments, who will assess the performance of individual teachers and researchers, who will assess the performance of the research chairs, needs to be clarified and made explicit now rather than later. So should a systematic system of publicly available course evaluations by students (this may already exist). Based on their experience in similar conditions, some of the committee members suggested that the ultimate decision should always rest with the board of the PSE foundation, with all other bodies playing only a consultative role.

We also had a number of more specific reactions and proposals.
It is essential that the teaching of the basic courses (M1 macro/micro/econometrics) be the best possible, and done by the best researchers. This does not appear to be the case today, and many of the best-known names appear to be teaching only more advanced courses. This should be changed, either through moral suasion, or through the use of incentives.

It is important that, despite the existing constraints on the appointment process (through CNRS, EHESS, and so on), that PSE establishes a presence on the junior recruiting market. Given its access to private funds and the associated flexibility, PSE is in a unique position to do so. Some of these funds should be used to appoint new assistant professors. This would also help PSE doctoral students understand and prepare for the international job market, an important medium-term goal.

In the same mode, it makes sense to more systematically invite some post-docs, and end-of-docs (students finishing their thesis). They are cheap relative to, say, senior and well-known lecturers, and are more likely to interact with students. In addition, if carefully selected, post-docs can provide supplemental teaching resources for offering modules on special topics that may be very useful for advanced Ph.D. students.

1-2. PSE-Paris 1.

The starting point of the other doctoral program is clearly very different from that of PSE-Jourdan. The challenge is how to carve out a high level PhD program, with outstanding faculty and outstanding students, in a university with many faculty members and very many students.

We believe that such a program can be created. We are impressed by the number of very good researchers at Paris 1, in particular (but not only) in international economics, and in macroeconomics. We are also impressed by the first steps taken to create the program.

We are nevertheless somewhat worried about various aspects of the current project:

The number of faculty, and the number of courses strikes us as too large. While it is only a small proportion of total faculty and total courses, it is still higher than is optimal. Reducing these numbers would increase the average value of the faculty, and make for a clearer intellectual program.

There should be clear rules for who and which courses belong to the PSE program, how new courses are added, and how courses which do not fit are taken out.

The complexity involved in running a magistere, a QEM program, and a master-PhD program, may lead to a dispersion of efforts. While the magistere may serve other
functions, the entry level in the master-PhD program at L3 in the magistere appears likely complicate the teaching structure.

We also had a number of smaller comments.

We were not clear about the criteria used to select among students at the L3, M1, M2, and doctorate levels. The underlying question is whether the level of the doctoral students, both in terms of training and in terms of ability, will be the same as for PSE-Jourdan.

As for PSE-Jourdan, it is essential that M1 courses be taught by the best and best known professors. To the extent that incentives are available, they should be used to achieve this result.

We were surprised by the number of hours of courses that the program intends to ask of students. In most PhD programs, the norm is four 3-hour courses per semester, for 12 to 14 weeks, so around 300 hours per year. This is far less than the number indicated in our Document (even without the indicated tutorial hours), and we do not see a rationale for deviating from that norm.

2. The specialized professional/multidisciplinary programs.

We shall again start with a few general remarks.

We very much agree with the need for more professional degrees in a number of economic fields, and for more multidisciplinary degrees in economics and related fields. Although the complementarities with the general economics programs are not obvious, PSE may indeed potentially be in a better position to offer such degrees than other institutions in France.

Given the complexity of putting in place the two general economics programs, some of us questioned however the wisdom of starting so many other programs right now. Surely other considerations are relevant, and the case for starting small scale, quasi-experimental, programs may well be there. But the opportunity cost is also there, and failure of one of these programs would adversely affect the image of PSE.

Our original mandate was to examine projects for eight programs, four of these projects being more developed, the others being at a more embryonic stage. There was no way we could discuss all eight at the meeting, and what follows is a review of the first four. Even these reviews suffered from tight time constraints, and should be read as tentative. We may well have missed important aspects of these programs. Some specific remarks, by individual committee members, on the eight masters, have been and will be passed along to the directors of the program; but they have not been discussed or vetted by the other SC members.
In other universities, professional master programs are at least self financing, and, more typically, money making. We are not clear as to what the intentions of PSE are on this front.

The professional masters require a lot of additional manpower. It may make sense to have a set of common M1 courses (say micro/macroeconometrics). It may also make sense to think of these programs as the embryo of a public policy school, with a core set of classes and various specializations. Indeed, some SC members thought that, if PSE is going to embark in that direction, it should think of creating a public policy school, rather than these specialized and independent programs.

2.1 Development program.

For each of the programs, we asked ourselves where the students would come from, what jobs they might hope to get, and whether the program prepared them well.

In the case of the development master, we believe that there is indeed a demand, and that students with such a master will find jobs. We also believe the program is basically sound. We have three general remarks:

We believe that the master should be more explicitly a professional rather than a research master. The curriculum should be designed with this goal in mind. For example, the memoire in M2 should be on a policy question rather than on an "original contribution to research".

We also believe that, for the same reasons, students should be exposed earlier to the issues they came to study, rather than having to wait until the second year. In other words, the standard "boot camp" approach of PhD programs, with a first year spent on micro, macro, and econometrics, with little explicit relation to real world issues, is probably not best here.

We are worried that the program may not have the manpower it needs. While there is a mapping from courses to names, we are worried that many of the faculty members in the program are young, with little research visibility. This may be an issue in attracting students; it may also be an issue in insuring the quality of the foundational courses.

Other points:

It was suggested that the memoire required in M2 could provide an occasion for students to address a policy question in the context of a research team effort, which would be jointly planned but to which they would contribute individually identified reports.
The program claims to be multidisciplinary. True multidisciplinarity is difficult to achieve, and its extent in the program is actually quite limited. This should be more explicitly acknowledged.

There seemed to be no course in economic history (with a focus on the history of developing countries for example) nor in environmental economics. Offering such courses would be desirable. One committee member suggested the relevance of a course on the economics of science, technology and innovation. A version of such a course might be focused on phenomena and policy issues that are particularly relevant for developing economies – e.g., relative input price expectations and technology choice, learning and localized technological change, diffusion and its productivity effects.

2.2. Public policy program.

Given the nature of public service training in France, we are convinced that there is a need for public servants with a stronger background in the theory and the evaluation of public policy programs.

We do not think however that the program presented at the meeting was sufficiently developed or sufficiently thought out. Who the students would be, where they would be employed, was not made clear. It was also not clear whether the ultimate goal of the program was to deliver a PhD, or simply a professional master. The program itself seemed to have holes, such as, for example, the absence of a course in public finance. Finally, the program also appeared to be France based and oriented, and thus not to be in the general spirit of the PSE project (this is not necessarily an issue).

In short, there may well be a need that this project will fill. But, at this stage, it is not sufficiently well articulated, and the proponents need to go back to the drawing board. Issues of articulation with the master in development, discussed earlier, should also be studied.

2.3. Quantitative sociology program.

The need for use of more quantitative techniques in sociology is clear---at least to economists... And it appears that this need is not filled anywhere in France at this point.

There was disagreement however among SC members as to whether the current project was sufficiently thought out. Some members thought that the basic structure was sound, and the relevant faculty was well connected to programs at, among other places, Oxford, Mannheim and at Stockholm. Some thought that it was too idiosyncratic, with too much emphasis on survey research, and too little on, for example, experimental sociology, or the study of organizations.
There was also a worry about the separate M1 tracks for ENSAE and sociology students. The notion that both sets of students would be equally able to handle M2 courses was not self-evident.

Finally, there was confusion among us as to whether the main goal was to offer a professional master or a PhD program; reference to academic openings in quantitative sociology was used to justify the project. But references were also made to the market for masters, and the needs of polling firms and so on. This should be clarified, as they imply different ways of thinking about the first two years.

Other points.

It would appear that the natural connections of this program with the micro econometrics faculty and the proposed courses in the PSE-Paris 1 program could be better exploited.

More could be done on causality, evaluation methods and analysis of censored and discrete processes. This would seem to be an important gap and one that is of particular concern in terms of capacity building.

More could also be done on demographic methods of analysis.

2.4. Program in economic history.

The architecture of this project, and the structure of a master or a PhD along these lines, did not come out clearly from the presentation or the associated document.

The belief of those SC members in the field was that, if such a project goes ahead, it should probably not include history of economic thought, which is a very different field from economic history.

Those members however questioned the justification for such a program in the first place. They thought that a better history course in the doctoral program allowing doctoral students to write a thesis in economic history, and adding a research chair in economic history would probably be better ways of increasing the visibility of economic history at Jourdan.

2.5. Other programs.

As noted above, the SC had no time to discuss programs 7-10, who seem to be at a more embryonic stage. Developing programs in economics and sociology (probably in connection with the quantitative sociology program), demography, economics and law,
and finance, might well be the road to follow for PSE in the longer run. The SC will examine such programs in later years.

Olivier Blanchard, Chair of the Scientific Committee of the Paris School of Economics
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