The Scientific Committee met on December 19, 2008. We were asked to look at three issues: The state of the two master-doctorate and the new PPD master programs; methods to assess the performance of PSE; the use of bonuses for publications.

1. The state of the three programs.

We understand the difficulties and the turmoil that PSE has faced over the past year. We understand in particular the constraints financial and institutional realities put on the ambitious recruitment plans presented in the past. While these issues fall beyond our purview, we are worried that the financial means available to PSE will make it difficult to compete for, attract, and retain first-rate researchers.

Our general assessment is that the three programs have not suffered from the difficulties facing PSE, and are of very good quality.

We found however the information we were given for the meeting to be insufficient to allow us to make such an assessment with great confidence. Reports for future meetings should include at least the following elements: A report by the head of the school about the general state of the school; an assessment by the head of each program about the state of the program, the progress or lack of in all relevant dimensions (teaching staff, new courses, improvement in existing courses, quality of teaching), and challenges ahead; information about the content of the courses, in the form of syllabi for each course (perhaps available on a site on the web, so as to limit the size of the report); an assessment of the quality of teaching, through a general assessment as well as details of the teaching evaluations; an assessment of the quality of the new students, and of the job market performances of graduating students. This information is essential if the school wants the Scientific Committee to do its job seriously.

Let me now focus on various dimensions of the program, as we were able to assess them.

Recruiting of students: The quality of the students, based on their school or university of origin, appears very high. We thought that increasing the proportion of foreign students would be desirable. This is important for the image and international positioning of the school. Also, foreign students tend to have fewer opportunities or constraints (such as belonging to another school, and following other tracks in parallel), and be more focused on the program.
Recruiting of assistant professors. We worry that the 3-year contract, with no tenure track, makes it very difficult to attract assistant professors. TSE appears to have been able to extend such contracts to 6 years. PSE should explore whether they can do the same. While this is still unattractive relative to standard tenure tracks in other countries, this would be a major improvement.

Teaching. There was no new information about the coherence and content of the program, beyond a listing of courses. We had examined both last year and found them to be good. We have to assume that this is still true this year.

We had indicated last year that some of the courses were getting very low teaching evaluations. The problems were apparently solved in core courses. There remains however a large heterogeneity of teaching grades, including some very low ones. (This statement applies to Paris Jourdan. The evaluations given by Paris 1, which indicate nearly complete homogeneity and high uniform satisfaction by students, struck us as unlikely to reflect reality, and be based either on sample selection or badly designed questionnaires.) One of the main characteristics of the most successful programs in the United States is their attention to teaching. The signal that this is essential should be sent again to the faculty.

A dimension in which progress could apparently be made is in the monitoring by the school of progress by thesis writers. In some cases, thesis writers disappear from the radar of their official advisor, and take many years to finish, or simply give up. Monitoring by the department of progress, or lack of, is essential. At MIT, this is done through two meetings a year, where the faculty goes through the list of students, and sees if something needs to be done.

The PPD program is one year old. It is too early to assess it, but it appears to be going well. We congratulate the school for starting it, and look forward to a more specific evaluation next year.

Research. The report gave a list of fields and a description of research directions. Clearly, the various research directions were fine. But the list and descriptions were not very useful tools to assess the quality of the research. Another set of documents listed publications in major journals by researchers from Jourdan and Paris 1. Researchers from Jourdan had 17 articles in the top 5 journals in the past four years. Researchers from Paris 1 had 4 articles in the top 5 journals during the same period. If one were to divide by the number of researchers in each department, this number would be far below that of top universities. We know that this reflects a large heterogeneity among researchers, and that knowing the distribution in each department would show that some researchers are very productive, while others are not. Information about each researcher's productivity (more on this below) would be useful to have in the future.
There was also a feeling among us that visibility of research at PSE should be improved. All researchers associated with PSE should be required to put their research in the PSE working papers series, and the series should be associated with the SSRN network, which insures quick diffusion to other researchers.

While we have concentrated above on potential problems (either in the reality, or in the reporting of reality of these programs), we want to emphasize again that the programs appear to be basically good shape. This is a major achievement under the circumstances, and the asset to be preserved as the school goes through its various transformations and faces coming challenges (new building, geographic unification of researchers from the two master-PhD programs, fund raising).

2. Tools for assessing the quality of research and teaching over time and relative to other institutions.

Developing such tools is a challenge facing all institutions. We made a number of remarks and suggestions.

Quality of the students. Tests such as the GRE are unlikely to discriminate enough among the relevant pool of applicants. Most are likely to score close to the top. Rankings in schools of origin, or grades at the university, can clearly help. The proportion of accepted students who go to another school, as well as information as to why they do so, are also very useful indicators.

Quality of the teaching. There, evaluation of the coherence and quality of the program by the SC seems essential. Evaluations from students, both about specific courses and about the program in general, are an important source of information. Placement records can give a more objective assessment. These are more likely to be useful in the case of PhDs, who take academic positions in departments that can be ranked, than in the case of Master’s students.

Quality of the research. The issues here are well known. There was general agreement that, for researchers at least a few years out, h-indexes are better than others, as they measure the impact of researchers on other researchers. Research is however multidimensional, and performance should not be reduced to one single criterion. For researchers in the REPEC network, REPEC gives a multiplicity of useful indices. For this purpose, it might be good to require all researchers to join REPEC.
3. Bonuses for publication.

The most productive researchers at PSE get eventual recognition by being given an associate chair. The issue is whether younger researchers should also receive a signal, perhaps in the form of bonuses for publications.

We agree that such a system makes sense. (Increases in salary clearly dominate, but we understand the administrative constraints). We made the following remarks and suggestions. If such a system is put in place, it should reward publications in the best journals only. Influence comes from writing important articles, not from writing many. Bonuses might take the form of research funds, as such funds can make a difference in the life of young researchers.

For the Scientific Council,
Olivier Blanchard.