Report of the Scientific Council

The Scientific Council met on Saturday, November 21, 2009.

Were present:
Robert Allen
Jess Benhabib
Olivier Blanchard
Rodolphe Dos Santos
Jordi Gali
Duncan Gallie
Oliver Hart
Sir James Mirlees
Torsten Persson
Patrick Rey

Were excused:
Richard Blundell
Naomi Lamoreaux
Dani Rodrik
Amartya Sen
Viviana A. Zelizer

We met with Francois Bourguignon, the directors of the programs, some students from the different programs, and some faculty members. Here are our main conclusions.

We first want to express our admiration to Francois Bourguignon and Roger Guesnerie for the work they have done over the last year, under difficult institutional and financial circumstances.

We also want to thank Francois Bourguignon for preparing a detailed report for our meeting, which allowed for a more focused and informed discussion on our part. In general, we are impressed by the way in which our recommendations in previous reports were taken into account, and, when feasible, implemented. (Indicating explicitly, in the report, which SC suggestions were or were not implemented, would be desirable in the future.)

This being said, we are worried about the challenges ahead. What we say below may go beyond our role as Scientific Council, and will not come as news to members of PSE. But we feel we have to express our worries.

The first, and perhaps main one, is the emergence of a very strong competition, namely the rise of Sciences Po as a serious player in economics teaching and research in France. The effects on faculty recruitment and retention are already visible. While, for the moment, departures have affected Paris 1 rather than Jourdan, it is also the case that some of the people that have joined Sciences Po would, in other circumstances, have joined Jourdan. The loss, measured this way, is already substantial. From what we know about the relative current and prospective financial
situation of the two institutions, the problem is likely to get worse rather than better. From a
distance, namely from our position as outsiders, it strikes us that both institutions have a lot to gain
from closer ties, if not simply from a merger. Sciences Po has the financial means, a good starting
group of faculty, but little research history, and no doctoral program yet. PSE has a number of
excellent faculty, access to excellent students, and an already well functioning doctoral program.
We are aware of the complexity—if (surely) not of the details—of institutional constraints, but these
may have to be challenged if the PSE and its PhD program are to survive and grow.

The second challenge is the existence of two separate master and doctoral programs within PSE,
which strikes us as increasingly counterproductive. Little seems to be gained from diversification,
little interaction seems to take place across students from the two programs, and the overall PSE
project suffers from a lack of clarity and consistency. We are again aware of the complexity—
and again, blissfully unaware of the details—of institutional constraints, and of the difficulty of
achieving such a merger. We believe however that an explicit plan and time schedule should be
drawn up to achieve such an outcome. Whether this leads to a unique program with smaller
overall enrollment, or to a program with large enrollment, but in which some of the courses are
taught by two teachers so as to limit class size, should be explored. If the merger leads to an
excess supply of faculty teaching, extending the number of PhD courses, i.e. courses offered to
post-M2 students, would be useful on its own, and is also an idea that should be explored.

We now turn to specific aspects of the programs.

We approved the nomination of the three candidates to associate chair positions. We believe all
three are doing high quality research and deserve such a promotion. We are however worried
about the evolving composition of the group of associate chairs, and the danger of an over
representation of pure theory relative to applied theory and empirical economics. We strongly
suggest that, in the future, a particular effort be made to rebalance in the last two directions. We
also think that the process of nomination should be made more formal, closer to the tenure
nomination process in the US. Each nomination could come, for example, with a letter from the
director presenting the merits of the case, on both research and teaching grounds. It should be
accompanied by a number of external evaluation letters written by experts in the candidate’s field
(chosen by PSE, not by the candidate).

In reviewing publication records, and the very interesting statistics put together in the report, we
were struck by the existence of a large lower tail, composed of faculty members with few
publications and very low (in many cases, zero) h-indexes. We believe that a process should be
put in place to terminate association with PSE when a faculty member is no longer contributing
substantially, either at the research or at the teaching end. (On a related topic, it would be useful
for the SC to get a sense of the distribution, by size, of the salary complements given to associated
faculty, as well as separate publication and citation records for this core group.)

In talking to the students, we perceived dissatisfaction with intellectual support at the thesis stage.
We were told by the directors of the program that a new system of thesis supervision, and the
creation of thesis committees meeting once every nine months, was being put in place. The
students we talked to were still working under the old regime. It may be that the new system will
reduce problems. But it may not be sufficient. Various ideas, such as at least one meeting each
term with the thesis committee, regular reports once a term on student progress, the requirement
that students have two thesis advisors, or that information about the record of various faculty
members as thesis advisors be more easily available, were made at the meeting. Also, while we
did not go into details, it appears that research assistantships are underused, partly because of a
potential conflict with the terms under which some fellowships are given. Such assistantships are
an important part of the PhD experience and should be encouraged and administrative constraints, if any, be removed. Students also mentioned that, despite efforts on PSE side, they still did not feel well prepared to face the US job market. It was also not clear how proactive PSE was in selling what it thought were its best students.

Finally, we believe that part of what made the PSE project different from most corresponding programs elsewhere was an emphasis on social sciences, going beyond economics. This has not materialized. A project for a master in quantitative sociology was proposed to the SC two years ago, but we thought it was not ready, and turned it down. Since then, little has happened. We think that it is time to revisit the issue, and explore whether and how more can be done, either through the offering of courses in existing programs, or through another attempt at designing a new master. Duncan Gallie has offered to explore these issues further with Francois and Roger.

A number of less important points also came up during the day.

The departure of ENSAE and the likely reduction in ENSAE students is a source of worry. This is related to our worry about the general orientation of the PSE PhD program, and the importance of applied and empirical work. We obviously have no solution to the problem, but thought that we would flag it, and ask the director to report on his thoughts at the next meeting.

Students mentioned the lack of class spirit, attributing it in part to the many entry and exit points at the M1, M2 and PhD levels. They contrasted this with the class spirit in US departments where all students go through the same set of courses. They also indicated that, for the students coming late in the PhD program, it was difficult to choose which advisor to match with.

Some students mentioned that not all TAs and faculty had office hours, and that some of the exams were written by the TAs. If true, both practices should be changed.

Some SC members emphasized the potential importance of large grants, in particular ERC grants, in boosting the PSE's fragile finances, especially in facilitating the recruitment of assistant professors. If they do not exist, clear rules regarding salary supplements and overheads should be put in place and advertised, to give the right incentives for faculty members to apply for those grants through the PSE.