The Scientific Council met on Saturday, January 22, 2011

Were present:
Jess Benhabib
Pierre André Chiappori
Rodolphe Dos Santos
Jordi Gali
Duncan Gallie
Naomi Lamoreaux
Sir James Mirrlees
Torsten Persson
Patrick Rey

Were excused:
Robert Allen
Oliver Hart
Dani Rodrik
Amartya Sen
Viviana A. Zelizer

The Council met with François Bourguignon, Roger Guesnerie, Pierre-Yves Geoffard, the directors of the programs (François representing Eric Maurin), three students and one faculty member (Akiko Suwa-Eisenman).

First, the Council expresses its gratitude to Olivier Blanchard, the previous Chair, for his outstanding contribution over several years. The Council also renews its congratulations to François, Roger and Pierre-Yves for the hard and successful work they have done in difficult context, and for the progress made.

Many of the recommendations of the previous reports have been successfully implemented. It was noted that the Labex proposal responded directly to one of the Council’s recommendations last year. Moreover, François’s report provides a discussion of most previous recommendations, and a clear update of the (largely institutional) obstacles encountered in implementing some of them (particularly the merger of the APE and ETE programs, which remains a long term objective). This allowed a more informed and efficient discussion on our part, and we wish to thank François for his effort.

Our general feeling is that progress has been made, and that the general direction followed by PSE is the right one. That said, some specific concerns remain about the whole PSE-project. The research performance of PSE as a whole is good but not outstanding, with few papers in top journals and limited scientific visibility, despite a large and talented faculty. The placement of PhD students is slightly disappointing, in regard of the talent of incoming students and the faculty; we are worried that this may reflect a lack of ambition in both groups. Collective responsibility for the working of PSE as a joint endeavor seems not to be uniformly strong, including among some Associate Chairs. Finally, important decisions (such as new hiring and promotions to Associate
Professor and Associate Chair) seem to be taken without a formal and transparent procedure for decision making.

These issues could and should be addressed. First, the Council unanimously considers that the time has come for PSE to engage into a general and collective process of clarification of its long term scientific strategy. Issues that should be discussed include the optimal size of the institution, a precise assessment of its strengths and weaknesses (in particular in terms of fields, some of which being clearly underrepresented for the moment), and a review of the various developments (notably regarding research directions) that could be considered in the medium and long term. This strategic reflection should provide a basis and a guideline for many future decisions, specifically regarding new appointments and/or promotions. Generally speaking, it would allow PSE to move from a mostly reactive attitude to a more proactive stance. Although the Labex initiative has triggered a first advance in this direction, we believe that the work done for the Labex application should be seen as a complement, rather than a substitute, to the strategic reconsideration we have in mind.

Second, we believe that some processes should be made more formal. We have especially in mind nominations to ‘associated chair’ positions, whether by internal promotion or external hiring - an issue already mentioned in the previous report. To some extent, such nominations correspond to tenure decisions in a US department; their importance is thus significant (arguably major), and justifies a formal process. Designing this process is a task that has to be performed internally; however, we would like to offer a few general recommendations.

- First, we believe that in such strategic matters, the final word should be left to scholars of outstanding scientific recognition; we therefore support the current system in which only current associate chairs can vote. At the same time, we feel that the voices of other scholars within PSE should be heard, because of both the potential relevance of their views and the frustration that may result from their complete exclusion from such a crucial process. A mechanism allowing a larger body to express their views could be considered.
- The requirements to become an associate chair, particularly in terms of recognition and visibility in the profession, but also in terms of overall service to the PSE, including teaching, supervision and placement of students, and general involvement in PSE’s life, should be clarified. Current associate professors should have a clear understanding of what would be required from them to become associate chairs; and there should be an explicit agreement about what is expected from newly elected associate chairs, notably in terms of involvement in the life of the institution.
- We recommend that each nomination come with a report, cosigned by two associate chairs, presenting the merits of the case. The report should describe the research accomplishments of the candidates and their international recognition, the importance of their role within PSE, and the relevance of their nomination in the context of the general scientific strategy described above; it could partly rely
on outside letters. The report, as well as the outcome of any internal vote on the topic, should be provided to the Scientific Council for final validation.

- Finally, the introduction of a formal, transparent procedure for the nomination or renewal of other junior affiliates may also be considered.

We now turn to more specific issues.

- Regarding PhD students, significant efforts have been made in terms of getting students focused on dissertation topics, keeping their work progressing, and making sure they are adequately advised. Still, the outcome, in terms of placement, remains slightly disappointing. Perhaps a more structured supervision and collective encouragement system, with many intermediate tasks and presentations to which not only students and the advisor but other faculty are expected to attend and comment, could be considered. Also, exposing more systematically PhD students to the recruitment process (in particular through attendance to job talks given at PSE or in the parent institutions) may help. At any rate, we feel that the current performance of PSE could probably be improved.
- The effort of opening the masters to foreign students (beyond those who are doing their undergraduate studies in the parent institutions) should be maintained and amplified. The program’s attractiveness vis à vis these students is a crucial indicator of its standing in a context of international competition for the best students.
- A list of current associate chairs should be provided to the Council, as well as information on the structure of complementary wages paid by PSE, for instance under a statistical form (mean, median, shape of the distribution).
- The new PPD program seems extremely successful, and the Council will follow its evolution with great interest.
- The idea of creating two new masters was briefly mentioned in the report and during the discussion. The project is obviously at a very preliminary stage; and we await and encourage further developments.
- Finally, the Council heard with great interest about the project of a Public Policy Evaluation Center (PPEC). Such a center could usefully build upon the expertise and recognition already acquired by some PSE members in that field.