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Rapport d'évaluation des Ecoles Universitaires de Recherche de la vague 1

Sir Malcolm Grant, président du jury international
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INTRODUCTION

«It was a privilege to have been appointed to undertake a mid-term review of progress in the development of the 29 graduate schools approved in 2017»

1. It was a privilege to have been appointed to undertake a mid-term review of progress in the development of the 29 graduate schools approved in 2017. We were a jury of 24 members, all external to France. Several of us had served on the original jury in 2017 (some also on the jury for the second wave, in 2019) and our numbers were enhanced by fresh membership to ensure that we had appropriate disciplinary coverage and expertise. Many members of the jury had extensive experience in graduate education and in university leadership, including leadership of graduate schools, in various jurisdictions.
2. We received the institutional self-assessments in October 2023 and assigned two jury members to each of them to report independently and in detail on their findings. We met in person in Paris on two occasions in November 2023. On the first occasion, we reviewed in plenary session all of the detailed reports over two days of meetings. At the end of this process, we were satisfied that 12 of the 29 projects were on track and could be recommended for approval without further steps.
3. For the remainder, where the jury was not fully satisfied on the material available to it, we concluded that the project leaders should be invited for interviews. We agreed on the issues on which we sought further information, and questions specific to each project were sent out to the institutions concerned in advance of the interviews.
4. Representatives of 17 graduate schools were interviewed in Paris on 27 and 28 November. For this purpose, the jury was split into two sub-juries, with rotating membership for each half day to ensure consistency of approach, and also to ensure that the two reviewers were present for the interviews of the institutions on which they had reported. The sub-juries reached provisional conclusions, and then at



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the subsequent plenary session, each case was again reviewed by the whole jury, and final decisions were eventually agreed by unanimous vote.

5. The outcomes of our final deliberations following those interviews demonstrate the wide range of quality that we observed:
 - a. **some of the projects are recommended unconditionally for second term funding in full;**
 - b. **Some are recommended for continuation but with strong recommendations for improvement;**
 - c. **Some are recommended for further funding for only a further limited period, to allow urgent steps to be taken in accordance with our recommendations. We envisage a period of 18 months and for the projects to report back in the program of mid-term review of the second wave. If the responses are unsatisfactory, funding should be discontinued;**
 - d. **For some we have recommended that funding should cease now.**

Sir Malcolm Grant,
Président du jury international



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The EUR objectives

Principal objectives of the EUR

- **Bridge the gap** between undergraduate and doctoral training in French universities
 - **Make research careers more attractive** by creating new, well-funded, high-quality and high-profile graduate schools freely inspired by a range of models observed around the world.
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6. The principal objective of the EUR project was to bridge the gap between undergraduate and doctoral training in French universities. The 2017 jury were advised that the three levels of bachelor/master/doctorate systems had often been managed quite separately, and that over the proceeding 25 years the Master's level had operated under a sharp dichotomy between a research-oriented track (with low student intakes and few funded doctoral positions to follow) and a professional or vocational track (with high intakes and good opportunities for internships and apprenticeships). The EUR initiative aimed to make research careers more attractive by creating new, well-funded, high-quality and high-profile graduate schools freely inspired by a range of models observed around the world.
7. To bring this about, the specific ambitions were:
 - a. To reinforce the international outreach and attractiveness of French universities and the French academic system;
 - b. To promote closer ties between teaching and research at the highest level;
 - c. To bring universities and the national research organisations closer together;
 - d. To build on the thematic strengths of existing programs, from very specific fields to multidisciplinary approaches.
8. In 2017, in selecting the initial round of projects, the jury were asked to seek out innovation and excellence, to look for a close integration between research and training, to ensure consistency in relation to the academic policy of the umbrella institutions, and to ensure efficiency of the graduate school governance scheme, with no split leaderships and with clear options for raising doctoral grants.



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9. In light of the heterogeneity of the existing structures across the 29 institutions and consortia, and of these several ambitions, it is unsurprising that the starting point for each of these projects varied significantly. This was very much an experimental program. Some institutions had already good quality graduate programs working closely with the national research organisations and engaged with their LABEXs; others were starting from a weaker base but demonstrated to the jury that they showed considerable potential.
10. The development of this first wave of graduate schools remains very much work in progress. This is not a final review, but a midterm assessment. We have taken into account the significant disruption caused to all the institutions by the pandemic. Some have obviously been more severely hit than others, particularly in student recruitment. There has also been some institutional disruption resulting from the mergers and regrouping through the IDEX and ISITE program. Insular institutional cultures appear to have been slow to change. As a result, the graduate school program overall has been a process of relatively slow evolution over the first five years. It is still some way from effecting the transformation of graduate training and education, and of the host universities, to which we aspire.
11. Against this backdrop, we can express strong satisfaction in the achievement of their ambitions by many of the graduate schools that we reviewed. We were persuaded that they were on track and required no further intervention at this stage. Some have been impressively innovative, creating new environments in which students can thrive and be well prepared for employment within or outside the academic realm. Some have taken the opportunity, through combination with one or more LABEXs, to deepen the diet of their Master's program. Some have achieved a smooth transition through the three stages. Many have significantly enhanced the international visibility and attractiveness.
12. There are several examples which we commend to the Ministry as excellent examples of what can be done in the French higher education system, under the right leadership, with high ambition and innovative implementation. They are cases where the EUR investment has brought significant added value, notably to the benefit of students. There are lessons here that are relevant not just to the other graduate schools in this wave, but for graduate education throughout the French university system. The panel recommended some 40% of the projects for continued funding without requiring an interview.
13. However, such high points have not been visible everywhere. Several of the programs have so far had disappointing aspects and in these cases the jury has focussed on the steps that need to be taken to bring about the substantial improvements that could bring them back up to the levels of their original aspirations. For various reasons, some of them summarised below, the EUR investment has failed to change the culture or stimulate fresh approaches. We have made specific recommendations in each case.

The student experience

14. But there are also several more generic aspects to which we believe close attention needs to be paid over the next period of funding. In many of the assessment reports, students were almost invisible. Indicators of success that were provided were too commonly those of the academic team, not of the students. Where reports of student assessments were provided, they were quite illuminating intended to demonstrate the close proximity between staff and students and genuine concern for their welfare and future employability. But these were the exception. We were surprised not to see more focus everywhere on what the EUR investment had meant for students themselves, such as how students are welcomed as active members of the academic community, how they are academically challenged and given sufficient autonomy and how they can benefit from the research environment.
15. We were bemused by the lack of any visible quality assurance mechanisms and of an apparent lack of standardisation in the reporting of performance metrics. We believe there is an opportunity here for all of the graduate schools to learn from the best practice in the world, and to be much more transparent about the tracking of student achievement and satisfaction.

Pedagogical innovation

16. This was something the 2017 jury paid particular attention to, and it was encouraging to find some innovative and exciting ventures now emerging. However, once again, these were the exception. In many of the reports there was no consideration or even mention of pedagogy at all: there might be metrics of student flows, but nothing about how students learn. This was surprising, given that there are many excellent examples of pedagogical innovation elsewhere in French universities. We had hoped to see evidence of the conception of students as creators, innovators and potential entrepreneurs, not simply as learners.

Leadership and institutional support

17. We were troubled by the number of cases where leadership was a central problem, where it was clear that responsibility had not been vested in the most appropriate people, and where much-needed institutional support to help unblock administrative obstacles seem to be absent. Even in universities that had gone through significant change through the IDEX and ISITE processes the graduate schools seemed to have experienced little improvement in the underlying academic culture. Indeed, the institutional restructuring may have had the perverse effect of marginalising rather than fully embracing the new graduate school structures. The ambition and excitement in the initial submissions in 2017 seemed in some cases to have been largely extinguished by institutional indifference and inertia.
18. Indeed, in the course of the interviews several concerns were voiced about institutional structures at all levels. They ranged from instances of lack of engagement or even deliberate obstruction by colleagues to the problems of operation under a regime of national rigidity in the structuring of disciplinary themes. But of particular concern was apparent disconnectedness from the institutional senior leadership, and a rigidity of internal structures and funding lines that militated against the graduate schools being able to reach across different disciplines in order to build novel interdisciplinary programs. True, we saw some imaginative work-arounds, but much time and effort seemed to be taken up in mounting internal hurdles when greater internal flexibility, led from the top, opening up interdisciplinary opportunities across the university, could have secured much better results.
19. Leadership, as so often, made all the difference. When leaders were engaged and enthusiastic, we had a sense of the birth of a completely new approach to graduate education. But in some cases, the project leaders seemed ill suited to their role, not being reviewed or supported internally, and struggling to cope.
20. We recommend that the presidents of all the universities in which these graduate schools are located should engage with them afresh and should initiate a thorough review of these issues, including:
 - a. **The future strategy for the graduate school,**
 - b. **the relationship between the graduate school and the overall academic strategy of the university,**
 - c. **Identifying and resolving any internal barriers to success,**
 - d. **their graduate school's relationship with other research clusters within the university, and**
 - e. **the steps needed to ensure that they have an environment in which they can thrive and become sustainable into the future.**
21. We note in passing that our experience in other jurisdictions is that it would be common for such national investments to require also a significant co-investment by the university and/or other institutions involved in the partnership, so as to secure continued senior level engagement in the planning and execution of the project.

Internationalism, communications and visibility

22. Despite the impact of Covid, several of the graduate schools have made impressive strides in developing a more outward-looking focus and attracting international students and faculty. Several have moved to offering instruction in the English language, which has sometimes been a challenge both for more senior staff who may be less fluent, and also for ensuring that French students are not disadvantaged. But we were concerned to learn that in several cases internal controls were hindering further innovative approaches.
23. For example, student recruitment might be the province of a separate agency rather than of the graduate school itself; likewise, communications strategy might be centrally controlled and divorced from the specific needs of the graduate school. We learned of cases where the project leaders were apparently forbidden to set up a website (though in one case a different project in the same university had the opposite experience). Coherent communications strategies were absent from too many of the graduate schools, and without them there is a very significant hill to climb in attracting students and raising national and international visibility. These graduate schools cannot hope to be internationally competitive without having the freedom to promote their programs to best effect.
24. We were concerned that the national portal established by MonMaster (<https://www.monmaster.gouv.fr/>) appeared insufficiently accommodating of the special needs of international students, operating only in French and maintaining a narrow window of time in which programs could be accessed.

Sustainability

25. We were interested to explore the thoughts of the project leaders as to the continuation of their graduate school at the end of the coming five-year term. We encountered a range of response, from optimism that funding might simply be renewed at that time, to confidence as to their ability to raise further funding independently in order for the program to continue once EUR funding ceased.
26. Planning for sustainability is not yet well developed, and this is a subject to which all the project leaders will need to turn their attention as soon as possible. It would be unrealistic to expect an infinite continuation of government funding. Some of the projects have sufficient resources to hand already, and the prospect of additional income from increased graduate student numbers, to be able to survive and thrive beyond the next five years. Some expect to generate support from within their institutions, some from external donors and foundations, and others by attracting industrial support. But many, perhaps the majority, have given little if any thought to the long-term sustainability of their graduate school.
27. If the reality is that there is little or no likelihood of further EUR funding beyond the current allocations, then we recommend that it be made clear now. In addition, the attention of the project leaders and of the presidents of the associated institutions should be drawn to this reality. We recognise that internal funds are more abundant in some of the universities than in others, but it would be a sorry failure if any successful graduate school were compelled to cease activity because of lack of foresight in ensuring continuing funding. It will be necessary above all to safeguard the interest of students already enrolled within the graduate schools.
28. There is much international experience that could be used to inform fresh approaches to institutional fundraising in France, and in devising greater flexibility in setting fees for graduate study.

Self-reflection

29. There are several strands here. The most informative self-assessments we received were those that were open and honest about not only their successes but also their problems, and outlined their plans to tackle them. At the very least, this signalled an ambition to take the mid-term review seriously. The best were explicit about opportunities – and how to seize them; and threats – and how to avert them. They had appointed internationally prominent members to scientific advisory boards, ensured they met regularly, and reported how their recommendations had been translated into action. They had a pedagogical vision, and explained their student evaluation processes and how they had responded to the student voice. They persisted in tracking the progression of their graduates, despite sometimes difficulty in eliciting responses, in order to learn the impact of their training. We recommend these issues be highlighted in the planning for the mid-term review of the second wave.

Conclusions

30. The EUR program has been fully worthwhile and a valuable investment. Although there have been several hurdles to success, not least the pandemic, we encountered several examples of first-class implementation. But the picture is mixed. In a significant minority of instances it has been a slow process to bring about innovation and transformation in so culturally-embedded an area of French higher education, and much remains to be done in the remaining period of investment. To that end, this mid-term review has been invaluable in examining in depth the performance to date of the 29, identifying strengths and weaknesses, some specific, many generic, and recommending remedial action where required. We commend what has been achieved, and we recommend for all stakeholders in this exercise a continuing learning process from the lessons we have learned, from the best practice we have identified in France, and from best international experience in graduate training and education.



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