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The Doctoral Program of the French Ministry of Agriculture: An Institutional and Individual Win–Win[1]

Global Networks, Global Perspectives and Global Talent
Discussions on the Development of Human Capital in Agribusiness[2]

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Abstract

The French Ministry of Agriculture implements a doctoral program for executives from its specialized administrative corps to develop lasting linkages between food policy makers and academia. Every year a limited number of positions are open to civil servants who wish to complement their technical and managerial education by three years of doctoral research. After undertaking PhD studies on a specific subject, these executives are better able to tackle the complex multi-stakeholder systems that characterize agrifood and environmental issues. They also develop an analytical framework and a better understanding of research methods and networks. This program helps to build institutional bridges between research and policy-making networks, allowing research to respond to genuine policy problems on the one hand, and policy makers to orient research more effectively while making better use of research methods and networks on the other.

Keywords: graduate education, public administration, agribusiness, agricultural and food policy

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FCPR Program Builds Linkages between French Agrifood Policy Makers and Academia

For the past 30 years, the FCPR program (French acronym of *Formation complémentaire par la recherche* or complementary education through research) of the French Ministry of Agriculture has aimed to build institutional bridges between policy makers and academia by training a pool of technical experts out of the specialized administrative corps of the civil service through PhD research. To date, the Ministry has gained some 200 PhD graduates through this program. Considering a growing gap between policy makers and researchers, the issue for the administration was to acquire the human resources capable of orienting research for effective policy making while increasing the international recognition of its experts.

Some institutional background is key to understand this situation. In the French civil service, different tasks have traditionally been given to different types of civil servants recruited after examination of their skills to perform a given task. Within the Ministry of Agriculture, one can basically identify two different human resource profiles in the executive positions that decide policy and conceptualize programs: the civil administrators whose function it is to manage the civil service and the specialized administrative corps who are proficient in either statistics, economics, nutrition, forestry, veterinary and agricultural sciences, engineering or rural development. Many of these civil servants have gone through one of the elite post-graduate schools (*grandes écoles*) that train future government executives.

However, this system does not fit well with post-graduate curricula in other countries. Therefore, its excellence and its graduates are not well recognized abroad. Through the so-called "Bologna Process," French *grandes écoles* are all reformatting their curriculum into a process that is comparable with that of post-graduate educational institutions in other countries. Yet, a PhD still is an undisputed signal of an outstanding individual in many international fora. It is often a requirement for recruitment in international organizations where the French administration is interested in placing more of its experts. The FCPR program enables agrifood policy makers to undertake doctoral research.

An Institutional and Individual Win–Win

Every year around 10 executive-level specialized officers are selected to start an FCPR program. The selection criteria include the topical nature of the candidate's research project to respond to a public policy problem of the Ministry, the motivations of the candidate to start and complete a PhD program, the coherence of the research project with the research unit or laboratory and with the university supervisor chosen by the candidate, and whether the project already has the backing of policy making units within the Ministry. Candidates to the FCPR program are usually young executives from a specialized administrative corps. Many are in their final year of post-graduate school. Others have worked a few years in government positions, allowing them to formulate a specific and topical research question.

Along its 30 years of existence, the FCPR program has set up and perfected an institutional system allowing the joint elaboration by policy-making services and its young executives of customized professional career paths within the Ministry, which incorporate doctoral research. Because the resulting research projects cover an *ad hoc* topic responding to a specific policy issue on a very technical subject, sometimes using unorthodox methods, one recognized strength of the FCPR program is its capacity to foster research that is "original" and often impossible in the context of regular research institutions.

Another objective of the FCPR program is to retain a pool of technical experts within the specialized administrative corps of the Ministry. These experts are in the front line to share their expertise when it is needed to inform policy decisions. They are solicited to deliver critical assessments on the work of their research peers and to help in orienting research for policy making. Their networks of former research colleagues are useful to identify national and international expertise on issues that are topical for the work of the Ministry.

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However, whether the new PhD graduate makes use of the expertise acquired during the FCPR is also a matter of personal choice: some former FCPR grantees willingly seek "normal" executive positions without putting forward their new expertise. Nonetheless, they will have been accustomed to research methods and will be able to build bridges between bureaucratic and academic cultures, which are not always comfortable with one another. Their social and professional capital will have been enhanced by their research network and their legitimacy within these networks strengthened thanks to their PhD. As for the administrative units that enroll former FCPR grantees, they gain in human resources diversity while enriching viewpoints for better-informed policy making.

Feedback on Program from Former FCPR Grantees

To illustrate the essay, a brief online questionnaire was sent by email to 15 former FCPR grantees who had undertaken their PhD in the past 15 years and had had some international professional experience. After one email reminder 11 questionnaires were completed. Although the sample size is not statistically significant, the responses and comments provide useful insights into the FCPR program and how it could be improved.

A great majority of respondents agreed that the FCPR program did, indeed, make a valid contribution to tackling the policy issues of the Ministry; only one respondent disagreed. Three respondents enlarged the relevance issue to cover French academia and research. One respondent commented: "*Although I did not continue working on my FCPR subject after my PhD, it has been pursued by the French National Institute for Agricultural Research with impacts on food and nutrition policies of the Ministry of Agriculture.*" Likewise, all survey respondents but one thought they contributed to developing a better knowledge of "research" methods by policy decision makers and the administration thanks to their FCPR.

However, there were mixed results on the usefulness of the FCPR for the respondents' career within the Ministry or abroad. If a majority of survey respondents agreed with the statement "*I have been able to use the technical or scientific expertise I had acquired during my FCPR in my work as a civil servant,*" two nonetheless considered the question irrelevant. In particular, three respondents who had just finished their FCPR and were about to, or had just started work in the civil service recently, were not yet sure. Two respondents clarified further: "*It is the scientific know-how and its methods that have been most useful for me in my civil service position, rather than my technical expertise.*" This point is important: many hopeful FCPR candidates are keen to develop a very specific technical expertise during their PhD, which they hope will be useful to their employer later on. However, the viewpoint of the administration is larger: it is useful to have PhD graduates within the civil service in order to make use of their analytical and research-based mindset, which are essential to set up relevant and robust policies.

Furthermore, although the questionnaire had been sent to people who had or were working on international issues, three respondents did not agree with, or thought irrelevant, the statement "*My FCPR experience has had a positive impact on my international career.*" One respondent commented: "*If having a PhD has a positive impact on international employment, it is not a determining factor in the position I currently hold.*"

This comment illustrates well the duality of positions held abroad by French civil servants. Only a minority of officers from the specialized administrative corps manage to get recruited independently within international organizations; their technical expertise and their PhD are, indeed, determining factors in their overseas recruitment. However, the majority of French civil servants who end up overseas are still paid fully, or in part, by the French government through seconded positions as technical experts or to act as French representative or administrator. A PhD is then more important for the individual to gain recognition from international peers, rather than in obtaining the position in the first place.

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Possible Improvements to the FCPR Program

The survey also asked for ideas on how to improve the program.

First, administrators in charge of the program could make more explicit its four overall goals to its candidates and partner administrations. Namely: creating bridges between administration and research, building human resources with analytical and research mind-sets, building human resources with precise technical expertise, improving the international recognition of French technical expertise. This would allow candidates to make better plans for their research project and reintegration within the civil service.

Second, better collaboration between academia, the public and private sectors could be encouraged to help young executives generate new research proposals, to decide which ones obtain an FCPR grant, and to supervise the doctoral research. The current process could gain from including more various stakeholders, including the private sector, to sit within a steering committee of the FCPR program and to monitor the research of individual grantees, thus improving the longer-term relevance of their research to wider issues faced by the agrifood sector. Indeed, a subject that might not seem to have any immediate application to those issues might nonetheless be worth investing into to kick-start academic research on the topic.

Third, strengthening the follow-up of the reintegration process of FCPR grantees within the administration would be beneficial: "*allowing the grantee to choose a position that will use his or her specific capabilities and expertise*" and "*increasing the awareness of senior administrators on the relevance for their unit of recruiting somebody with a research background.*"

Finally, partnerships with international research centers and universities abroad could be encouraged so as to improve the international recognition of the program and of its graduates. Some of the ideas proposed to foster international collaboration around the FCPR program include:

1. Encourage more FCPR candidates to choose a university abroad.
2. Encourage grantees to take a semester within an overseas research lab to start off their doctoral research.
3. Set up an 'international doctorate' initiative on the basis of the current 'European doctorate' to encourage doctoral students to work with academics from other countries.

To conclude, food and agribusiness public policies are increasingly becoming sustainable development policies. The French Ministry of Environment now also uses the FCPR program concept to commission research of interest and train its own young executives. As a result, both Ministries of Agriculture and Environment are collaborating to modify the current program to suit their needs better. The pool of young FCPR candidates being the same for research positions supervised by either ministry, it is particularly important that the human resources policy of the Ministry of Agriculture evolve so as to keep fostering research in its topical domains and to retain the resulting expertise and know-how. This reflexion on the FCPR program is particularly relevant in a general French context of evolution of the different administrative corps and the growing distance between policy makers on the one hand and research institutes and the private sector on the other. Improving the FCPR program could help bridge these gaps by encouraging the professional mobility of senior executives between these three economic worlds.

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