

# French auditors criticize €5-billion science super-campus near Paris

Would-be rival to MIT lacks strategy and governance, report says.

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An artist's impression of the Institute for Integrative Biology of the Cell, one of the many new buildings planned for Paris-Saclay University.

France's government auditor has taken a sharp swipe at efforts to develop a science super-campus near Paris that, by 2020, was supposed to rival the world's top campus universities, such as the US Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

More than €5.3 billion (US\$5.7 billion) in public spending has been earmarked for the Paris-Saclay science cluster, the Court of Auditors estimates in an [annual report](#) published on 8 February — but the original vision of creating a large integrated research university there is “at a standstill”.

The Saclay plateau, about 30 kilometres south-west of Paris, has for decades been home to a high concentration of private and public research labs. In 2010 — by which time some 25,000 people worked there, including thousands of scientists — former French president Nicolas Sarkozy declared that it should [transform into something grander](#): an MIT *à la française* that would shine in international university rankings.

The idea was to meld together what Sarkozy called a badly coordinated “mosaic of institutions” into a cohesive whole by concentrating and restructuring the site's research around interdisciplinary themes, and also to relocate several elite higher-education institutes, or ‘grandes écoles’, to Saclay. Tens of thousands more students and researchers have since moved to the campus, which is now collectively known as the University of Paris-Saclay.

But a lack of an overall strategy and governance means that Paris-Saclay risks remaining a mere geographical grouping of higher-education and research establishments without any “real coherence and international visibility,” the auditor’s report says. There is a “real risk that despite the huge investment of public funds, the initial ambition will be watered down,” it adds.

It’s not the first time that the Saclay idea has attracted criticism. A French Senate report published in May 2016 said that institutions’ attempts to maintain their own identity had destroyed the collective project, and called the situation “blocked”. And last April, the French government said it would give the Paris-Saclay cluster 18 months to sort out its difficulties — or else it would cut off stimulus funds granted under an ‘excellence initiative’ scheme that aims to reward the best research campuses in France.

### **Cluster or university?**

The president of the University of Paris-Saclay, Gilles Bloch, says that the auditor’s conclusion is “totally false”. Since the government’s edict last year, he says, an ad hoc committee of the heads of seven establishments on the campus representing all the partners — except two — has met weekly to draw up proposals for a new structure that would strengthen links in research, teaching and human resources.

The two absentees are grandes écoles that specialize in engineering, and include the prestigious École Polytechnique. They were not invited to the table because they do not want closer links with their partners, Bloch says. Polytechnique president Jacques Biot explains his institution’s position in the auditor’s report. Picking up on the idea that Paris-Saclay should be more like California’s Silicon Valley than like MIT, he notes that the valley has no real governance, and needs none. The original idea for Saclay was a science and technology cluster, not an integrated university, Biot maintains.

Although it has been hard to persuade the grandes écoles to join forces, the government’s funding has, at least, brought new dynamism to science at Saclay, says Philippe Vernier, director of the Paris-Saclay Institute of Neuroscience, with new projects, new buildings and a stronger presence for biology alongside physics, mathematics and engineering.

Some of those involved in the project say that Saclay might end up splitting into two clusters, one for the engineering grandes écoles and the other for science universities. But Bloch says he hopes the grandes écoles will return to the fold once a plan takes shape, ideally before a jury reconsiders this December whether Paris-Saclay deserves its ‘excellence initiative’ label and funding.

“Rival clusters make no sense. It is important for all establishments to join forces to create a modern university,” he says.

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