Scientific Council Assessment of Bruegel's 2007-09 publications

1. Procedure

Bruegel's Board decided on 25 September 2009 that the Council should assess the scientific value of Bruegel's publications on the basis of the same criteria as in the previous review round:

- 1) whether the work has chosen an important question to answer, and has made that importance clear to the reader;
- 2) whether it is well focused on the key issues under examination;
- 3) whether the appropriate range of economic analysis and the available evidence has been effectively used;
- 4) whether the work's policy recommendations, if any, are grounded in an impartial assessment of the scientific arguments and evidence;
- 5) whether there is significant value added in relation to the existing literature; this need not consist of an original scientific contribution but can be met by a work of synthesis that brings out aspects of existing scientific findings that have not been previously been appreciated or disseminated;
- 6) whether the technical aspects of the analysis are sound and of a high standard;
- 7) whether the results are communicated clearly in a manner accessible to policy makers.

It would have been impossible for the Scientific Council to assess in detail all of the items published during the assessment. Accordingly, the Scientific Council asked Bruegel's staff to indicate the 20-25 items that in their view contributed most to their scientific reputation, and planned to select randomly from the complete list of all publications a similar number for specific assessment. It was made clear that the Council would pay equal attention to the two samples, while expecting the former to be better than the latter.

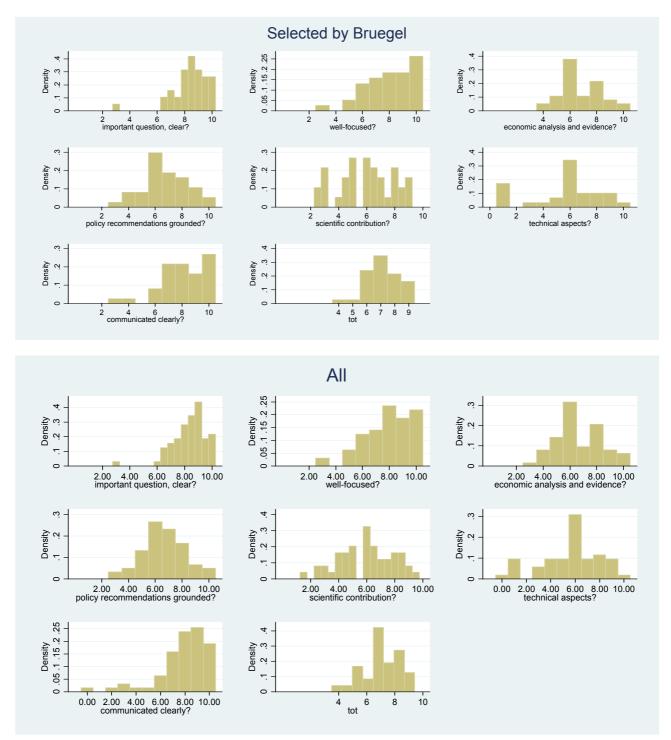
The two lists were submitted by Bruegel on January 19, 2010. The "selected" list included 30 items, rather than the 20-25 requested. The "all publications" submission listed 84 items. The Chair asked each Council member to provide by mid-March reviews for about a dozen items drawn from both list, retaining about the same number for himself. Reviews, in the form of a filled-out questionnaire (Annex 1 here) with quantitative scores and optional brief replies to the seven questions above, could be prepared by the members on their own, or consulting external experts.

If all requests had been honored, two reviews would be available for each of the 30 "selected" items and for 18 other items. Two members (Ventura and Zingales) did not supply any reviews, and the response rate was less than 100% for other members. Despite assurance of anonymity, it proved impossible to obtain reviews from peer researchers in the Brussels area, who cited personal acquaintance with the authors and/or issues with Bruegel's abundant funding (from countries and private bodies) and privileged communication links (with the European Commission) as reasons for their inability to provide a review that would be perceived to be objective. The response rate to review requests, as in any peer review process, may but need not convey information regarding the academic interest of the publications or whether an objective review, if supplied, would been positive or negative.

A total of 66 assessments were obtained (37 for items selected by Bruegel, 29 for random other items) of 46 items (20 items had two reviewers); 18 of the assessments were prepared by outside referees invited by the Council member in charge.

2. Results

All scores are listed in Annex 2. The following figures report the distribution, separately for items selected by Bruegel and for all items, of scores on the seven aspects listed above. Scores on questions 1 and 5 are averages of replies 1a-1b and 5a-5b in the assessment form. The "tot" score is a simple average, disregarding not provided or explicit "not applicable" replies, of the seven scores.



There are very small differences between the two distributions, indicating that Bruegel did not heed the need to identify its scientific value added strengths.

Quantitative statistics:

	Selected by Bruegel						All					
	Obs	Mean	Stdv.	Min	Max	Ins*	Obs	Mean	Stdv.	Min	Max	Ins*
Issue	38	8.41	1.33	3.00	10.00	3%	66	8.33	1.23	3.00	10.00	2%
important question?	38	8.71	1.52	3.00	10.00	3%	66	8.70	1.31	3.00	10.00	2%
made clear?	38	8.11	1.52	3.00	10.00	5%	65	7.98	1.47	3.00	10.00	6%
Well-focused?	38	8.00	1.77	3.00	10.00	8%	65	7.88	1.75	3.00	10.00	9%
Economic analysis and	37	6.78	1.53	4.00	10.00	16%	64	6.67	1.69	3.00	10.00	23%
Policy rec.s grounded?	37	6.73	1.69	3.00	10.00	19%	61	6.64	1.59	3.00	10.00	21%
Scientific value added	37	5.95	1.96	2.50	9.00	41%	63	6.06	1.96	1.50	9.50	38%
original contribution?	35	5.06	2.71	1.00	10.00	54%	61	5.36	2.59	0.00	10.00	49%
work of synthesis?	29	6.86	1.85	4.00	10.00	31%	52	6.81	1.94	2.00	10.00	29%
Technical aspects?	29	5.66	2.64	1.00	10.00	31%	52	5.63	2.41	0.00	10.00	37%
Communicated clearly?	37	8.08	1.72	3.00	10.00	5%	64	7.88	2.05	0.00	10.00	9%
Tot	38	7.13	1.29	3.57	9.43		66	7.06	1.33	3.50	9.43	

^{*} Ins: Fractions of expressed scores below "6" = adequacy to think-tank standards.

Single-digit percentages of scores fall short of 6 as regards choice of issues and clarity of exposition. On the negative side. Roughly half of the scores expressed fall short of the bar for "significant value added in relation to the existing literature in terms of original research" and almost a third for "...work of synthesis".

The lowest averages are scored for the "Scientific value added" and "Technical aspects" criteria, where the variation across items (as well as across reviews for the same item) is higher than for most other criteria.

The highest "tot" scores were above 9 (all for items selected):

- 20s. Coming of age: report on the euro area = 9.17 and 9.29
- 28s. Beyond the WTO? An anatomy of EU and US ... = 9.25
- 26s. Higher aspirations: an agenda for reforming European universities = 9.43

(The other reviewer of this item, quoted in footnote 3 below, gave scores that averaged to tot=7.92)

The lowest "tot" scores were below 5 (two of these for items not selected):

- 27n. Will the current crisis trigger a revival of the IMF? =3.5
- 2s. Why Europe is not carbon competitive = 3.67
- 47n. Cost benefit analysis of the Community patent = 4.42
- 17s. The monetary mechanics of the crisis = 4.92

The following table sorts research areas by mean Tot scores.

	Obs	Mean	Stdv.
Macroeconomics	8	7.53	1.31
Research, innovation and growth	15	7.50	1.35
Trade, investment and competitiveness	12	7.48	1.40
Labour, migration and ageing	3	7.16	1.38
Financial markets and regulation	5	6.98	0.49
European policies and governance	5	6.91	1.08
New member states, enlargement and neighbourhood	4	6.64	0.17
International macroeconomics and global governance	9	6.28	1.43
Climate change and energy	5	6.17	1.69
All	66	7.06	1.33

Difference across areas are occasionally large, but statistically insignificant.

The verbal element of the reviews highlighted reasons underlying mixed performance.

The highest mean scores were given for "Importance of the issue" and "Clarity of presentation." The assessment of these aspects was uniformly very positive with some exceptions. ¹

Among the items that did well on most dimensions, "Of markets, products and prices - the effects of the euro on European firm" attracted the remark "This is an ideal study for a policy institute: it draws on important new methodological developments and applies them to a real-world problem with a level of detail that academic journals would not allow."

The lowest scores were given for "Scientific value added". Even when their overall assessment were very positive, reviewers asked specifically to assess the scientific quality of the publications sometimes found that their impression was mixed, and different from that of an earlier reading. ² Criterion 4, regarding policy implications, also attracted some criticism.³

Some of the material was perceived by reviewers to be weak overall, and occasionally misleading. Even highly competent academic economists appeared occasionally to jump to conclusions, cutting corners off intricate and delicate arguments (and failing to distinguish between resolved and unresolved empirical and theoretical issues) when writing in the slim format of some Bruegel publications (but still using some of the apparatus of scientific work, such as references and footnotes), perhaps reflecting a hopefully mistaken impression of the level of policy debate in political (as opposed to journalistic) circles. ⁴ While these are isolated instances, they may casts doubt on internal control procedures.

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¹ For example on "Demographics of Global Corporate Champions" the reviewer felt "Not entirely clear why this is an important topic from a policy standpoint—or at least not motivated all that well"; on "Why Europe Is Not Carbon Competitive" both reviewers were perplexed by the narrow and unusual angle taken on important issues, and "The Baltic Challenge and Euro-Area Entry" similarly puzzled reviewers by its topic, and also by its descriptive style with little references to broader issues and small conceptual value added.

² On "Higher aspirations: an agenda for reforming European universities" the reviewer wrote "... found it less impressive on second reading. The part on undergraduate education is weak. I am also worried about the fact that the authors make sweeping recommendations without a in depth examination of the consequences and of the different possible policies. For instance, the call for greater autonomy should have included a more in depth discussion of how governments still give incentives and control the fact that the taxpayers' money is spent in socially desirable directions."

³ For example on "No Green Growth Without Innovation" the reviewer wrote "The paper does not assess evidence for the importance of subsidies to R&D; it just recycles a pre-existing model of one of the authors which assumes that R&D will not take place without subsidies." On "The Happy Few," one review stated "The policy conclusions are generally sensible, but some of them are a bit of a stretch on the basis of the evidence at hand (which are correlations and stylized facts rather than causal and structural)."

⁴ For example on "A better process for a better budget" the reviewer wrote "Some of the figures and analysis look to be incorrect. In particular, it is hard to understand how a 10% cut in CAP (in round numbers, 10% of 0.4% of EU GNI – i.e. 0.04%) as envisaged in scenario 2 could switch the UK net position by nearly a percentage point of UK GNI (from – 0.35 to +0.45), as shown in figure 3. Indeed figure 3 seems implausible in other ways, such as the big gain for Sweden from scenario 2 or the fact that scenario 1 seems to leave the UK better off, despite what is said in the text. ... While it takes careful reading to spot this as a problem, once spotted it does undermine the credibility of the analysis."

Also "The Monetary Mechanics of the Crisis" was felt by both reviewers to be ill-focused and confusing. One reviewer wrote "...on the basis of the analysis you cannot identify what is demand and what is supply so that the piece is not very useful for understanding the mechanism of the crisis," noting that more informative analyses have been published of the same issue; the other wrote "Just because the money supply has held up does not mean that monetary policy has prevented a credit contraction. The author even says as much right below figure 8, but then ignores this. If everyone agreed that basic monetarism was all that mattered this would be a great article. But that doctrine is far from universally accepted."

3. Summary assessment

A meeting on April 1 discussed the results and reached the following consensus assessment.

The Council appreciates the overall quality of Bruegel's publications as a very useful and informative body of writing on timely and important topics, often on subjects not much analyzed elsewhere. The members of the Council were particularly impressed by the editorial quality of presentation and by the strong choice and clear discussion of policy issues.

The Council's mandate was to assess the scientific quality of Bruegel's contribution, not to judge what fraction of its output should provide scientific value added. The publications reviewed were felt to come in different categories, with different strengths and weaknesses:

- 1. Some items addressed important policy issues in non-scientific style. This was felt to be appropriate for Policy Briefs on topics where scientific arguments are underdeveloped. Some of the Policy Contributions also fell in this category, to which criteria of this evaluation were not applicable.
- 2. The strongest items in the Council's view were those written by reputable scientists on highly topical issues and novel data, in a style and with a timeliness that made it possible to extend their impact much beyond what could be achieved by academic publication.
- 3. Some publications included original research, as well as compilation of facts and theories. The original research content was not often perceived to be strong. Some Policy Contributions covered topics that appeared to lie outside the contributors' expertise, sometime resulting in superficial and occasionally misleading discussion.
- 4. Some items were by non-resident researchers who produced for Bruegel nicely accessible summaries of book-form or academic-paper work of theirs. These were among the most appreciated by reviewers but did not score high on originality. The Council also wondered whether some of this work belonged to Bruegel's research profile under review.

Council members who had participated in the previous review recalled the recommendation to make a suitable distinction between informed opinion, aimed to persuade, and the presentation of conclusions based on scientific research. It was felt that changes made to the publications process at Bruegel had not entirely removed confusion on this front. While Policy Briefs may reasonably vary in their reliance on scientific research according to the requirements of the topics in question, readers could easily be confused as to the extent to which the conclusions of these briefs were grounded in scientific arguments and facts as opposed to representing intelligent, but debatable, opinion or speculation.

The Council strongly feels that rigor is necessary in order to maximize the impact of Bruegel publications on policy debates, and that the uneven (across items, and across criteria within each item) performance of the output reviewed could potentially endanger the reputability of Bruegel's brand.

To preserve and enhance this valuable asset, Bruegel should:

- (1) Assure the substantive quality of its publication both by ensuring that the issues addressed fall within its own and the authors' scope of competence, and through careful internal and external review processes when appropriate.
- (2) Clearly signal to readers whether and when the conclusions of its publications are definitively grounded in existing facts and theory (so that only new facts or theories could call them into question), or controversial (hence open to dispute), or provocatively speculative and awaiting future confirmation.

The Council's mandate did not request recommendations as to how these goals might be achieved. However, a more formal and clearer distinction between the Blueprint and Policy Briefs/Contributions series would be useful. Items issued in the Blueprints series, which scored better than the others as regards scientific aspects, would benefit from being externally refereed.

After two rounds of comments and revision by email, this report was finalized and transmitted to the Review Task Force on April 30, 2010.

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ANNEX 1: Review form

Please answer the following questions in the form of a score between 1 (="absolutely not") and 10 (="very much so"), with 6 representing adequate performance on that criterion for a research think-tank. Do feel free to type a short qualitative sentence to justifies/qualify that score.

Name of reviewer:		
(strictly confidential to the Scientific Council)	Title of i	tem reviewed:
	Score	Additional comments
Has this piece a. chosen an important question to answer?		
b. made that importance clear to the reader?		
2. Is it well-focused on the key issues under examination?		
7. Does it use effectively an appropriate range of economic analysis and available evidence?		
7. Are its policy recommendations, if any, grounded in an impartial assessment of the scientific arguments and evidence?		
5. Does it provide significant value added in relation to the existing literature, in the form of a. an original scientific contribution?		
b. work of synthesis that brings out aspects of existing scientific findings that have not been previously been appreciated or disseminated?		
6. Are the technical aspects of the analysis sound and of a high standard?		
7. Are the results communicated clearly in a manner accessible to policy makers?		

ANNEX 2: All quantitative scores

Issue	S1
important question?	S1a
importance made clear?	S1b
Well-focused?	S2
Economic analysis and evidence?	S3
Policy rec.s grounded?	S4
Scientific value added	S5
original contribution?	S5a
work of synthesis?	S5b
Technical aspects?	S6
Communicated clearly?	S6

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	s1 8 26s. s1	Hig	s1a 8 gher aspi s1a 10	slb 8 rations: slb	s2 9 an agenda s2 10	s3 8 a for re: s3 10	s4 9 forming s4 9	s5 . European 1 s5 9	s5a 8 universit: s5a 8	s5b ies by Phi s5b 10	8 ilippe Agl s6 8	9 nion , s7 10
	26s. s1 10 26s. 9.5	Hig Hig	sla 8 gher aspi sla 10 gher aspi 10	slb 8 rations: slb 10 rations:	an agenda s2 10 an agenda 7	s3 8	s4 9 s4 s4 s4 s4 s4 s4 s	s5 European 1 s5 9 European 1	s5a 8 universit: 55a 8 universit: 7	ies by Phi s5b 10 10 ies by Phi	8 ilippe Agl s6 8	9 nion , s7 10 nion ,
	s1 8 26s. s1 10 26s. 9.5 27s. s1 9	His Eur Bey	sla 8 gher aspi sla 10 gher aspi 10 gher aspi 10 rope's R& sla 9	s1b 8 .rations: s1b 10 .rations: 9 .compared to missing s1b	s2 9 san agenda s2 10 san agenda 7 g the wro s2 7	s3 8 s s s s s s s s s	s4 9 forming : s4 9 forming : 7 ets? by : s4 6	s5 . European 1 . s5 . 9 European 1 . 7 . Bruno van	s5a 8 universit: 55a 8 universit: 7 Pottelsbe s5a 5	ies by Phi s5b s5b 10 ies by Phi 7	8 ilippe Agl s6 8 ilippe Agl .	9 nion , s7 10 nion , s7 9
	\$1 8 26s. \$1 10 26s. 9.5 27s. \$1 9	Higher Higher Beginstern Highe	sla 8 gher aspi sla 10 gher aspi 10 rope's R6 sla 9 yond the sla 8	s1b 8 rations: s1b 10 rations: 9 D: missin s1b 9 WTO? An a s1b	s2 9 san agenda s2 10 san agenda 7 sg the wro s2 7 natomy o: s2 10 s2 10	s3 8 8 8 8 8 8 8 8 8	s4 9 forming : s4 9 forming : 7 ets? by : s4 6 US pref. s4 6	European 1 s5 9 European 1 7 Bruno van s5 6 erential 1	s5a 8 universit: 55a 8 universit: 7 Pottelsbe 55a 55a 10	ies by Phi s5b 10 ies by Phi 7 erghe 55b 7 eements by s5b 6	8 ilippe Agl s6 8 ilippe Agl . s6 6 V Henrik I	9 nion ,
	\$1 8 26s. \$1 10 26s. 9.5 27s. \$1 9 28s. \$1 7	Higher Higher Begins Be	sla 8 gher aspi sla 10 gher aspi 10 rope's R6 sla 9 yond the sla 8 yond the sla 10	s1b 8 rations: s1b 10 rations: 9 cD: missin s1b 9 WTO? An a s1b 6 WTO? An a s1b	s2 9 s2 s2 s2 s2 s2 s2 s	s3 8 8 8 8 8 8 8 8 8	s4 9 forming : s4 9 forming : 7 ets? by : s4 6 US pref s4 6 US pref s4 10	s5 . European s5 9 European 7	s5a 8 universit: s5a 8 universit: 7 8 universit: 7 Pottelsbeen s5a 5 trade agreen s5a 10 trade agreen s5a 9	ies by Phi s5b 10 ies by Phi 7 erghe s5b 7 eements by s5b 6 eements by	8 ilippe Agl s6 8 ilippe Agl . s6 6 7 Henrik 1 s6 6 7 Henrik 1 s6 10	9 nion , s7 nion , 9 nion , 9 nion , s7 nion , s7 6 nion , s7 nion , s7 nion
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	\$1 8 26s. \$1 10 26s. 9.5 27s. \$1 9.5 28s. \$1 9.5 29s. \$1 8.5	Higher Hi	sla 8 gher aspi sla 10 gher aspi 10 rope's R8 sla 9 yond the sla 8 yond the sla 10 fe and Sc sla 9 fe and Sc	s1b 8 rations: s1b 10 rations: 9 D: missin s1b 9 WTO? An a s1b 6 WTO? An a s1b 9 pund: an E s1b 8 pund: an E s1b	s2	s3 8 8 8 8 8 8 8 8 8	s4 9 forming : s4 9 forming : s4 6 US pref s4 6 US pref s4 10 vereign s4 9 vereign s4 6	s5	s5a 8 s5a 8 s5a 8 s5a 8 s5a 9 s5a 10 s5a 10 trade agree s5a 9 t by Larse s5a 9 t by Larse s5a 10	ies by Phi s5b 10 ies by Phi s5b 10 ies by Phi s5b 7 erghe s5b 6 eements by s5b 6 eements by s5b 8 -Hendrik H s5b 8 -Hendrik H	8 ilippe Agl s6 8 ilippe Agl . s6 6 7 Henrik s6 6 7 Henrik s6 8 86 10 Röller , 1 s6 8	9 nion 57 10 nion 9