

HCERES

High Council for the Evaluation of Research
and Higher Education

Department of Research Evaluation

report on research unit:

Centre d'Études Biologiques de Chizé

CEBC

under the supervision of
the following institutions
and research bodies:

Université de La Rochelle

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique – CNRS

Evaluation Campaign 2016-2017 (Group C)

HCERES

High Council for the Evaluation of Research
and Higher Education

Department of Research Evaluation

In the name of HCERES,¹

Michel Cosnard, president

In the name of the experts committee,²

Raoul Van Damme, chairman of the
committee

Under the decree No.2014-1365 dated 14 november 2014,

¹ The president of HCERES "countersigns the evaluation reports set up by the experts committees and signed by their chairman." (Article 8, paragraph 5)

² The evaluation reports "are signed by the chairman of the expert committee". (Article 11, paragraph 2)

Evaluation report

This report is the sole result of evaluation by the expert committee, the composition of which is specified below.

The assessments contained herein are the expression of an independent and collegial reviewing by the committee.

Unit name: Centre d'Études Biologiques de Chizé

Unit acronym: CEBC

Label requested: UMR

Current number: UMR 7372 (CNRS), USC 1339 (INRA)

Name of Director (2016-2017): Mr Xavier BONNET

Name of Project Leader (2018-2022): Mr Christophe GUINET

Expert committee members

Chair: Mr Raoul VAN DAMME, University of Antwerp, Belgium

Experts:
 Mr Vincent BELS, CNRS (representative of the CoNRS)
 Mr Mathieu DACHER, Pierre et Marie Curie University, Paris 6 (representative of the CNU)
 Mr Benjamin REY, CNRS (representative of the supporting personnel)

Scientific delegate representing the HCERES:
 Mr Christopher CARCAILLET

Representatives of supervising institutions and bodies:
 Mr Joël CUGUEN, CNRS
 Mr Jean-Marc OGIER, Université de La Rochelle

Head of Doctoral School:
 Mr Paco BUSTAMANTE, Doctoral School n° 7266, "Gay-Lussac"

1 • Introduction

History and geographical location of the unit

The research unit CEBC (Centre d'Études Biologiques de Chizé) was founded in 1968 as a field station of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), specialised in the study of the physiology of wild animals - mostly mammals and reptiles. To that purpose, the unit was equipped with an endocrinology lab, a facility that has continued to play a central role in the unit's research activities.

Over the years, the research unit has widened its research horizon and it now addresses a variety of ecological and evolutionary questions using a broad range of model organisms and ecosystems. The unit developed a special interest in the ecology of the French Southern and Antarctic Territories (Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises - TAAF) under the directorship of Mr Pierre JOUVENTIN (between 1986 and 1998). Subsequent directors Mr Patrick DUNCAN (1999-2006) and Mr Vincent BRETAGNOLLE (2007-2013) shaped the CEBC into a leading institute dedicated at understanding the responses of wild animals and ecosystems to natural and anthropogenic disturbances and stressors.

On several occasions throughout its history, the CEBC unit has faced difficulties with its infrastructure and a dwindling staff number. However, in the last few decades, it has succeeded in securing financial support for modernizing the buildings and in attracting a substantial number of new researchers. Currently, the unit is well populated and is a vibrant world-class centre for ecological research and educational activities.

The CEBC is situated in the midst of the Chizé state forest, in the rural Department of Deux-Sèvres, about 25 km south of the city Niort. This unique position is an asset, because it puts researchers and students in the middle of their study terrain; but is also presents a challenge, as the geographic isolation may thwart the recruitment of permanent staff.

Management team

The current director of the CEBC is Mr Xavier BONNET, the current deputy director is Mr Christophe GUINET. At the start of the next five-year contract, Mr Christophe GUINET should take on the role of director *ad interim*.

HCERES nomenclature

Agronomie, Biologie Végétale, Écologie, Environnement, Évolution (SVE1).

Scientific domains

The CEBC's research is aimed to understand how life, at the level of individual organisms, populations, communities and ecosystems, responds to environmental stressors - be they natural or anthropogenic in origin. To this purpose, the unit uses a wide array of model species and natural systems, and a variety of approaches - from molecular and hormone analyses over experiments in controlled environments (e.g. mesocosm) to in-situ field studies and computer modelling. The research is aimed to generate a fundamental scientific understanding, but also to provide practical guidance for the management and conservation of natural systems. In addition, the CEBC invests in a variety of educational programs and training activities in environmental science.

Unit workforce

Unit workforce	Number on 30/06/2016	Number on 01/01/2018
N1: Permanent professors and similar positions	5	5
N2: Permanent researchers from Institutions and similar positions	17	18
N3: Other permanent staff (technicians and administrative personnel)	23	20
N4: Other researchers (Postdoctoral students, visitors, etc.)	7	
N5: Emeritus	1	
N6: Other contractual staff (technicians and administrative personnel)	20	
N7: PhD students	28	
TOTAL N1 to N7	101	
Qualified research supervisors (HDR) or similar positions	17	

Unit record	From 01/01/2011 to 30/06/2016
PhD theses defended	49
Postdoctoral scientists having spent at least 12 months in the unit	14
Number of Research Supervisor Qualifications (HDR) obtained during the period	5

2 • Assessment of the unit

Global assessment of the unit

The central research objective of the “Centre d'Études Biologiques de Chizé” (CEBC) is to identify the mechanisms and processes that regulate biodiversity dynamics, at the level of organisms, populations, communities and ecosystems. Understanding how and in how far biological systems, at multiple levels of organisation, can respond to environmental stressors is of fundamental scientific interest, but has become indispensable in this era of unprecedented anthropogenic interference.

Focussing on a variety of organisational levels, study organisms and biotopes, the CEBC teams are at the leading front of evolutionary and ecological research. The unit collaborates extensively with research teams around the world. It has been successful in attracting PhD students from different national and international universities, and in obtaining considerable external funding from both national and European bodies. All this has contributed to the vitality and efficiency of the three research teams that constitute the unit. The outstanding scientific productivity of the unit is best demonstrated by the large number of high-quality publications and the international recognition of its expertise. The unit has also taken a lead role in the development and maintenance of several important long-term monitoring programs, related to environmental changes.

In addition, the CEBC has developed a wide array of activities aimed to educate the public on ecological issues. It participates in several environmentally oriented master programs, by offering regular courses and, importantly, by offering research-driven schooling in the collection and analysis of ecological data. Other educational activities target professionals like foresters and fire fighters. The CEBC reaches a wide public through outreach-activities involving a wide range of media. The majority (17/22) of researchers at CEBC holds a HDR (“Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches”) certificate, but all members are involved in teaching activities, ensuring a strong research - education nexus.

While the CEBC's unique geographical location, in the centre of an area of outstanding ecological, faunal and floristic interest, offers many opportunities for research and education, it also complicates the recruitment of personnel. Although the number of researchers at the CEBC has increased significantly over the last years, replacing some of key figures (as they retire) in the next few years, might present a challenge. In contrast to the number of researchers, the number of technical staff (ITA) has not increased, and thus threatens to dwindle further as a result of budget cuts. If no action is taken, this imbalance may affect the productivity of the unit in the future.

At the moment of evaluation, no definitive decision had been taken on who is to succeed the current director of the unit in the long term. While the functioning of the unit is ensured by the appointment of an ad-interim director, the committee of experts strongly recommends to clarify this issue.