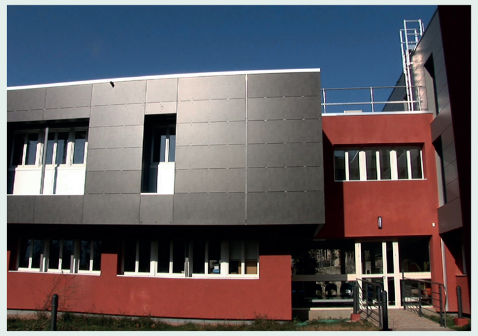
Laboratoire d'Economie et de Sociologie du Travail

UMR7317
CNRS – Aix Marseille Université
35 Avenue Jules Ferry
13626 Aix en Provence Cedex 01



Téléphone : +33 (0)4 42 37 85 00
Fax : +33 (0)4 42 26 79 37
Mail : lest_contact@services.cnrs.fr
site : www.lest.cnrs.fr

Presentation of the LEST Institute of Labour Economics and Industrial Sociology

UMR 7317,
Aix-en-Provence

Status and History

The Institute of Labour Economics and Industrial Sociology (LEST) is a Mixed Research Unit of the CNRS and the University of Aix-Marseille.

Initially, the LEST was a separate research unit of the CNRS. It was established in 1969 to reinforce French research on labour and its evolution.

Its aim continues to be the development of research on labour, employment, training programmes and innovation in the social sciences and humanities

Epistemological and Methodological Principles

Since its foundation, and despite the constant renewal of researchers and research objects, the LEST relies on the following methodological principles that are highly valued by its members:

- **pluridisciplinarity** : since its creation, the institute was a pioneer in adopting a bidisciplinary perspective: economy and sociology. Today, it has broadened its pluridisciplinarity to include management, political science and law as well. These different disciplines do not simply coexist side by side at our institute, but are rather combined and articulated through our research programmes and projects. This pluridisciplinarity is materialised in many co-publications.

- **methodological pluralism**. Through the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, our aim is to account for emerging phenomena. Experience has shown that statistical tools available and qualitative analytical methods are complementary and allow for a thorough description of phenomena while grasping their dynamics and mechanisms.

- **comparisons** at different scales. Comparisons can include populations, organizations or periods. The institute built its reputation on international comparisons; in particular, through the method of Societal Analysis that represented a conceptual and methodological advance for international comparison approaches in the functionalist and culturalist traditions.

- **contextualization**. Numerous research projects at our institute attach great importance to context, especially temporal, and favour, when possible, processual or longitudinal approaches to the study of phenomena.

- **iteration between empiricism and theory**. Work at our institute is nourished with in-depth empirical studies. The institute engages in numerous collaborations with different actors of economic and social life.

- **organizations**, namely, firms, remain **a privileged observation site**, both as producers and carriers of the transformations of market society. According to the methodological logic of the Societal Analysis, firms are not conceived as "nexus of contracts" but rather as a collective actor.

A scientific Agenda around the Recomposition of Norms of Labour, Employment ans Skills

The focus of the scientific agenda of the LEST is the "Recomposition of Norms of Labour, Employment and Skills".

In effect, the present societies are confronted by transformations or even changes of a society that "often associated to efficiency and legitimacy crisis, finds support in a constant redefinition of the modes of coordination and exchange." The trend is the development of market referents that, in a normative perspective, are commonly presented as the best way to "modernize" society and to justify, though questionably, the use of the expression "market society." Research shows that this is not mere rhetoric as shown by the destabilization of internal markets "à la française," the redefinition of the boundaries between the public and the private sectors concerning research, the questioning of the relevance of status, namely public, or, moreover, the destabilization of the social category of reference "executives."

The focus on the "Recomposition of Norms of Labour, Employment and Skills" thus allows us to address the questions that are essentially related to the current functioning of the French labour market, through the study of the relations established between the actors and organizations involved in its functioning. These norms are heavily influenced by social action at different levels—representations, rules, instrumentations, concrete applications—that interact with each other following diverse, sometimes contradictory, modalities.

The growing interdependencies between the observable recompositions in the productive french society and the international dynamics have recently lead the laboratory to question frontally the recomposition of norms of labour, employment and skills in the perspective of globalisation, knowing that globalisation is not considered as an object of study but rather as a vector of recomposition. The question of the "sustainability" of the transformations in progress is also to be asked. This means the quality and the economic, social and environmental viability of those recompositions, at a worldwide scale but also at a national, regional and local one.

Organization of Research

The implementation of this research agenda relies on two programmes that depend for a significant part on projects developed as parts of invitations to tender.

Each programme is organized around a central theme, although with relative flexibility. Their aim is to facilitate scientific production and recognition, but also to integrate newcomers—both doctoral students and senior researchers—to our institute. Some research projects have grown to the point of increasingly structuring the operations of the programmes.

Additionally, LEST research groups are involved in numerous research projects on international migration issues, the production of academic quality, the prevention of psychological risks, internal markets dynamics, biographic turning points and competence management in subcontracting networks of small and medium companies of the aeronautic sector.

Programme 1: Innovation and New Organization Models
Programme 2: Labour Markets, Trajectories and Professions

As a complement to work carried out in these programmes, a General Seminar was created to reinforce the coherence of the projects carried out at the institute and to guarantee the production and circulation of knowledge among the two Programmes and their contribution to the general research theme.

Finally, based on a flexible and transverse option, research "workshops" have as an objective to create conceptual and theoretical advances by linking them to methodological innovations.

Members ans Partnerships

Today, the LEST includes forty or so researchers or lecturer researchers and about ten staff members and research technicians. The LEST strongly benefits from the presence of a large technician and administration staff that is engaged with the functioning of the institute.

Since a few years, the LEST has recruited an important number of young lecturer researchers. This reinforcement is one of the results of our active and sustained collaboration with the members and concerned parties of partner Universities. They strengthen the institute's aims and its position in the field of pluridisciplinary research. In the future, individual mobility of researchers and lecturer researchers towards the LEST will be pursued.

These individual "reinforcements" are possible due to the implementation of collective collaborations that have been institutionalized at local, but also national and international levels. The activities and attractiveness of the institute are increasingly based on its ability to engage in network partnerships that increase its visibility and contribute to its collective scientific dynamics.

Local and International Partnerships

The institute and its members engage in relations of scientific exchange through local, national and international partnerships. The laboratory has built numerous productive partnerships with universities and teams from all over Europe, North and South America.

The institute develops relations with Japan, Canada, Latin America and its partners that are both continuous and pluridisciplinary. They rely on the exchange of researchers, graduate or

post-graduate students and are increasingly leading to scientific publications. These collaborations allow for an approach to research on the basis of international comparisons.
Since 2011, the LEST is a member of the Laboratoire d'Excellence, LabexMed, driven by the Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l'Homme which associates 15 research units of the University of Aix-Marseille.

Furthermore, the LEST is an Associated Regional Centre of the Centre for the
Study and Research on Skills (Céreq) for the regions of Corsica and PACA.

Lastly, the LEST is a founding member of the Pôle Régional Travail which gathers 6 research, study, training and intervention structures, established in the PACA region, aiming to become a reference and a resource for all the actors concerned by work, employment and training in the Region.

Teaching and Research

Finally, the presentation of the scientific agenda of the LEST would be incomplete without mentioning the institute's commitment to teaching and doctoral training.

The researchers and lecturer-researchers at the institute participate actively in two Master Programmes of the University of Aix-Marseille ("Sociology" and "Human Resources and Responsible Management of organizations). In addition, the LEST is a member of two doctoral schools (Economics and Management and Spaces, Cultures and Societies). The institute takes doctoral mentoring very seriously. It is in this perspective that two doctoral schools are a valuable resource.
The institute pays close attention to the quality of doctoral mentoring. In addition to the two previously mentioned seminars for the exchange and valorisation of research, a monthly seminar was established a few years ago to supervise the progress of the dissertations developed at the LEST with the additional support of an external visitor. Furthermore, the institute implemented several years ago a means to supervise dissertations collectively through the follow-up committees that include, in addition to the thesis supervisor, two researchers that are also resources for the doctoral student. The professional insertion of the doctors formed at the LEST are moreover excellent!

Written by
Ariel Mendez,
Lest Director
Professor
Management Researcher