

Cour des comptes



THE PARIS BRAIN INSTITUTE (ICM)

Financial years 2020 to 2023

Organisation receiving donations

September 2025

Summary

A foundation operating in the field of neuroscience, resulting from a collaboration between the public and private sectors

The Paris Brain Institute Foundation (hereinafter referred to as the 'ICM Foundation'), recognised as a public interest organisation in 2006, began operating its research centre in 2010, located at the Pitié-Salpêtrière University Hospital in Paris on land owned by Assistance publique – Hôpitaux de Paris (AP-HP). This international centre of excellence in neuroscience brings together public and private partners, with a large field of activity covering fundamental research, clinical investigation, as well as the promotion and support of innovative biomedical companies through its "start-up studio".

The Paris Brain Institute is home to scientific teams drawn mainly from the public sector, formed within a joint research unit (UMR) under the supervision of the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), the National Institute of Health and Medical Research (Inserm) and Sorbonne University. The ICM Foundation provides them with administrative, financial and logistical support; it also makes high-level technological platforms and associated human resources available to them and to external parties (academics, companies, etc.).

A sound financial situation based on a dynamic balance, with income and expenditure increasing in equal measure

From early 2020 to the end of 2023, the ICM Foundation's workforce grew by half, reaching 460 employees. This increase was driven by the expansion of its research staff (mainly PhD candidates and postdoctoral researchers funded through competitive research grants), as well as by staff assigned to platforms or support functions. At the Institute level, the foundation's employees became the majority in 2023. To cope with the growth in its operating expenses (+35%), it has drawn on a variety of sources of income: grants from calls for projects, income from its activities and resources from public donations, representing 25%, 29% and 46% of the resources collected in 2023, respectively. The relative share of the latter category is set to increase further in order to support its ambitions.

Its financial position remained stable, with total assets of around €150 million at the close of the 2023 financial year, and sound thanks to controlled levels of debt. Its cash position remained at around €40 million. In the absence of a reserve policy defined at board level, it is managed solely by the treasurer in practice and follows very conservative investment choices. The function and size of this reserve would benefit from being better defined in terms of its multi-year strategic and financial outlook, approved by the governing bodies and outlined in the foundation's communications.

Obligations related to appeals for public generosity partially met, financial communication to donors to be refined

The ICM Foundation has fulfilled its obligation to submit an annual preliminary declaration to the prefecture and produces each year the income statement by source and destination (Crod) as well as the annual statement of use of collected resources (Cer). However, its deliberative body has never formally approved in advance the list of social missions or the rules for allocating expenses between them, operating costs and fundraising costs. These terms and conditions were not explained in the notes to the accounts, particularly with regard to the allocation, which was also inaccurate, of certain expenses (senior

management and general secretariat costs, IT, general resources) to social missions, which would normally be classified, at least in part, as operating expenses. It was only after the Court's investigation that most of these shortcomings were rectified by the board of directors in May 2025.

On average, the foundation reports a program expense ratio of 85% over the period, which is partly due to some of the aforementioned allocation choices, as well as the inclusion in this heading of grant research costs that should be tracked separately. It also results from the restatement of carry-overs to dedicated funds, i.e. funding allocated by third parties to a specific project that could not be used for its intended purpose during the financial year; these should be disclosed more explicitly given their significant weight in the foundation's economic model.

To provide donors with better information, the breakdown of resources between the various social missions selected would also benefit from being included in the Crod and Cer statements. Voluntary contributions in kind, which are significant in terms of major corporate donors and philanthropists and primarily benefit fundraising activities, should be valued or, at a minimum, provided with more complete quantitative and qualitative information.

Structured and effective fundraising from the public, marked by the long-standing importance of *major corporate donors and philanthropists* as well as the more recent growth of gifts and legacies

The level of income from public generosity rose from €18 million to €31 million between 2020 and 2023, an increase of around 70%, to reach 46% of operating income. This development was supported by the implementation of an effective strategy in which, however, the board of directors has little involvement. The management teams responsible for fundraising have grown over the period, in line with this increase in activity.

While continuously developing its fundraising efforts among the general public, with more than 300,000 individual donors since its creation, the ICM Foundation has historically relied on support from major corporate donors and philanthropists. These continue to be at the heart of its fundraising strategy and act as influential relays on its behalf, complementing the founders' own efforts. This effort has taken on a more international dimension in recent years, with the creation in 2023 of a foundation in the United States, intended to increase the Institute's visibility within the country's philanthropic sector.

Donations developed later, but grew significantly over the period, accounting for nearly a quarter of the resources generated by public generosity. This growth is set to continue and increase in view of the number of confirmed or potential testators. The number of staff assigned to prospecting for donations and their administrative management is small, and the IT tools at their disposal have only recently been upgraded to professional standards, but the procedures followed are adequately formalised. Given their growing importance and number, the division of responsibilities for accepting bequests between the chairman and the board of directors could be rebalanced in favour of the latter.

Social missions focused on research activities and the operation of platforms supporting these activities

The ICM Foundation pursues four social missions in practice: 1) the implementation of research programmes; 2) the operation of its technological platforms; 3) the promotion of research and innovation, which includes the start-up studio; 4) scientific outreach and the formation of international alliances (the scope and content of this mission are less clear in the accounting documents).

Research activity, structured around five major scientific fields and conducted mainly through the UMR teams, is naturally central. These teams receive a basic grant from the

foundation, funded entirely by public generosity, which they can use very freely. Added to this is a smaller and decreasing amount paid by the public supervisory authorities, as well as the organisation of internal calls for projects, intended to promote cross-disciplinary work and the emergence of innovative projects. This funding is supplemented by grants obtained through public or private calls for projects, which account for a significant proportion of the teams' overall resources.

The three other social missions either support research – as is the case with the operation of platforms, even though these may also provide services to external public or private actors – or, in the case of the latter two, are an extension of it. The foundation has also developed its policy of promotion and innovation over the period in order to strengthen the economic and industrial development potential of its own researchers' scientific discoveries. The Paris Brain Institute has also gradually developed an enriched offering of initial and continuing training, complemented by initiatives to disseminate knowledge in neuroscience to the general public.

A foundation whose board of directors must further assert its role as a decision-making and steering body

The hybrid nature of the Institute is reflected in the governance of the foundation through the representation of institutional partners on the board of directors, but the functioning of the board is nevertheless marked by the predominant influence of the founders, even though public partners can assert their interests on issues specific to the management of the UMR.

The risk of this imbalance seems to be accepted in the name of preserving the entrepreneurial spirit that has presided over the Institute's growth and justifies the flexible functioning of its administrative services, which focus on providing technical and regulatory support to researchers. However, given the steady growth of the foundation, and in order to strengthen its governance with a view to the gradual withdrawal of the founders, its board of directors would now benefit from exercising its prerogatives more fully on administrative and financial issues, in particular by reviewing the very broad powers delegated to the chairman (for the acceptance of bequests) or the treasurer (for reserve and investment policy).

Declaration of compliance

On completion of its audit, in the light of the due diligence it has carried out and within the limits of the prerogatives conferred on it by Articles L. 111-9 and L. 111-10 of the French Financial Courts Code, the Court of Accounts finds that the expenditure incurred by the 'Paris Brain Institute' Foundation during the financial years 2020 to 2023 is consistent with the objectives pursued by the appeal to the generosity of the public, on the one hand, and with the objectives pursued by the foundation, on the other.

However, the Court has two reservations relating to:

- the failure of the board of directors to formalise the definition of its various social missions and the rules governing the preparation of its income statements by source and destination (Crod) and its annual statements of use of collected resources (Cer);
- the inaccurate allocation to social missions of expenses that, by their nature, should be classified as operating expenses.

Recommendations

The Court makes the following recommendations to the Paris Brain Institute Foundation:

1. Define a reserve policy in line with the foundation's strategic objectives and have it approved by the board of directors in parallel with the adoption of the next budget in September 2025.
2. As of the adoption of the 2024 annual report, inform donors of the distribution and amounts committed to each of the missions announced by the foundation