

**AHELO STAKEHOLDERS' CONSULTATIVE GROUP  
SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS  
MEETING 4 FEBRUARY 2009**

**Opening session**

1. Marijk van der Wende, Chair of the IMHE Governing Board, and Jan Levy, Chair of the AHELO Group of National Experts (GNE), welcomed participants to the meeting. Marijk van der Wende recalled the role of IMHE and how the AHELO feasibility study fits within the work of IMHE and more broadly of the OECD.
2. Jan Levy explained the role of the AHELO GNE and the decisions taken by the GNE regarding the function and role of the Stakeholders' Consultative Group (SCG). He mentioned the expectations expressed by the GNE on setting up a group that would reflect the diversity of higher education and would offer an open platform for discussions.
3. Richard Yelland recalled the historical setting of the AHELO project and the mandate given to IMHE to steer the feasibility study. He presented apologies from the participants of the SCG who could not attend that meeting: Geri Malandra (ACE), Lesley Wilson (EUA), Terrel Rhodes (AAC&U), and Reinhilde Veugelers (EEA). He noted that the Secretariat had briefed the EUA Secretariat, on 3 February in Brussels.

**Presentation of the AHELO feasibility study and discussion**

4. The AHELO feasibility study was presented extensively by Karine Tremblay, project manager.
5. The participants expressed interest from their respective organizations in the unfolding of the AHELO feasibility study, but also for some of them concerns and skepticism regarding the ambition of such a study, pointing out the risk for the AHELO feasibility study to lead to unwanted standardization of the learning outcomes or another ranking. Irrespective of their organization's position, however, they all welcomed the involvement of stakeholders in the feasibility study to discuss these issues.
6. Karine Tremblay explained why the two disciplines (economics and engineering) were selected:
  - Economics is a social science grounded in research;
  - Engineering is a scientific discipline taught in both technical and research institutions. This choice favors the diversity of institutions within the sample of participating institutions. Moreover, education in engineering is regulated worldwide by/with the professions and an in-depth reflection on the learning outcomes of programmes in engineering has already taken place in many countries.
7. In the following discussion, five main issues emerged from the stakeholders' questions and perspectives on the AHELO feasibility study.

### *Relevance of the AHELO feasibility study*

8. All participants, particularly the employers' representatives (Isabelle Biaï, CEMEET; Marita Aho, BIAC; Irene Seling, BIAC; Jörg Steinbach, SEFI) recognized the relevance of the competence-based approach that clarifies the needs of the employers regarding higher education and allows higher education programmes to fit in with the demands of the job market and of the broader society.

9. Marita Aho (BIAC) inquired about the ways in which the voice of the labour market stakeholders could be properly taken into account by the feasibility study in the definition of learning outcomes. Karine Tremblay indicated that representatives of the professions would be involved together with faculty members in the TUNING work which was expected to lead to commonly agreed definitions of expected learning outcomes in the disciplines. Stefan Delplace (EURASHE) also reminded the group that Lifelong Learning results in a diversification of students bodies and that the feasibility study should pay attention to this.

10. Eva Egron-Polak (IAU) recalled that the learning experience undergone by the students encompasses more than simply in-classroom teaching and learning. The overall dimension of the learning experience (citizenship, values, ethics, etc.) should ideally be encompassed by the different strands of the feasibility study. Karine Tremblay informed the group that the generic skills strand will be designed to take account of such dimensions, even though the feasibility study is not meant to capture all of them.

11. Overall, participants recognized the value of testing the performance of teaching in higher education along with the collection of contextual data which will render the performance measures meaningful. Eva Egron-Polak (IAU) indicated that one positive outcome of the AHELO feasibility study is to have already called the attention of countries and stakeholders to the teaching mission of HEIs, not only in, but also beyond OECD member countries.

12. Dorte Kristoffersen (APQN) underlined the extent to which the quality assurance systems are bound to the outcomes-based national qualification frameworks emerging worldwide. An increasing number of HEIs now operate in the context of qualification frameworks and endorse an outcome-based accountability system. This trend is likely to impact the work and scope of the quality assurance: should the feasibility study conclude that learning outcomes cannot be soundly appraised at the international level, the impact on evaluation methods could be dramatic.

13. With respect to the relevance of AHELO for quality assurance, Judith Eaton (CHEA) recalled that the accreditation audit and quality assurance bodies are experiencing increasing pressure from policymakers and broader society to move beyond the assessment of inputs and processes, and to reshape the scope of assessments to deepen the appraisal of outcomes. The transformative education process is furthermore put on the agenda of most stakeholders involved in the measurement of learning outcomes in the USA.

14. At the same time, Bruno Curvale (ENQA) reminded the meeting that current trends in quality assurance stress developing internal quality mechanisms allowing HEIs to provide evidence on the quality of their outcomes. He encouraged the feasibility study to preserve and foster the responsibility of the institutions when the surveys will be administered. Stephan Delplace (EURASHE) also suggested that the feasibility study must be aligned with the increasing sense of accountability of institutions regarding quality.

15. Finally, Judith Eaton (CHEA) invited the feasibility study to bring light on the twofold (and conflicting) aims of quality assurance: improvement and accountability. She thought that the feasibility study could provide valuable insights on this duality.

### ***Governance of the AHELO feasibility study***

16. Karine Tremblay clarified the composition and role of the Group of National Experts, explained why this terminology was used, and described the roles of the various expert groups involved in this work:

- In 2006, the OECD Education Policy Committee adopted a framework for the creation of its subsidiary bodies whereby time-bound groups that work on a specific issue of a substantive and technical nature are to be established as a “group of national experts” (GNE). Since the AHELO feasibility study meets the criteria of a time-bound project of a substantive and technical nature, it is in OECD parlance a Group of National Experts, although the GNE’s role is partly managerial.
- Delegates to the GNE are designated by countries and speak for them. Most current AHELO GNE members are involved in higher education in their country of origin and interested in the measurement of learning outcomes. For the AHELO feasibility study, they are expected to provide guidance on directions, as well as act as project managers at national level, drawing whenever necessary on external expertise. Participating countries are allowed to nominate up to three representatives to the GNE, to reflect the diversity of expertise required for a project of this kind. Some have already stated they would nominate one expert of a specific field covered by the feasibility study (*e.g.* economics or engineering).
- In order to make informed decisions, the GNE will draw, whenever needed, on input from “specialist experts”. These are high profile experts in a specific substantive or technical area who will provide the GNE with a technical viewpoint, on behalf of their own knowledge and/or practice in the field. They are engaged by OECD to provide advice and do not represent countries.
- Finally, the “stakeholders” represent the organizations familiar with the evaluation of learning outcomes, and/or challenged to take more account of the outcomes of higher education. The participation of stakeholders in the Stakeholders’ Consultative Group is primarily due to their position as representatives of recognized bodies operating in higher education. However, since most participants in the SCG have a thorough expertise in higher education, they could bring relevant inputs into the feasibility study and be invited to participate in some methodological developments where appropriate.

17. Roland Schneider proposed that the SCG express views upstream of the GNE’s meetings, to feed the discussions of the latter group. Karine Tremblay explained that the summary records of the SCG meeting would systematically be circulated to the AHELO GNE for information, and that the next meeting of the GNE on 27-28 April would discuss extensively the role of the SCG and the views expressed during its 1<sup>st</sup> meeting.

### ***The concept of quality in the AHELO feasibility study***

18. The participants inquired about the concept of “quality” to be used for the purpose of the AHELO feasibility study, and warned against the risk of misunderstandings, as “quality” underpins values and meanings that differ according to the stakeholders and countries. Marie-Odile Ottenwaelter (INQA/AHE) recalled that the international trend promotes the autonomous definition of quality by the institutions themselves. The audience acknowledged that defining “quality” is not a pre-requisite for the AHELO feasibility study as this could artificially rigidify categories of learning outcomes.

19. Participants endorsed the multidimensional approach to quality that prevails in the feasibility study. However Jörg Steinbach (SEFI) brought up the distinction between the measurement and the

definition of the levels of learning outcomes, warning against the risk of going beyond the measurement of learning outcomes to set minimum standards in the various dimensions of quality. While he recognized that a reasonable measurement of learning outcomes is lacking and it would be most useful for the sector to progress on that issue, he also felt that setting rigid pre-defined minimum standards would impair the diversity of missions and profiles and could lead to standardization. It was thus felt by the group that the feasibility study should clarify this point, with a view to keeping diversity alive.

20. The TUNING approach drew much interest as many participants had a clear knowledge of this project, or were involved in it earlier. Initiated by faculty members, the TUNING project has respected the diversity of quality while it has come to a shared agreement on learning outcomes of a set of disciplines at the international scale. Marie-Odile Ottenwaelter (INQAAHE) underlined that the feasibility study, following TUNING, could seek to identify common elements helping at mutual recognition within the diversity of the missions of higher education.

21. Bruno Curvale (ENQA) insisted on the complexity of the concept of quality in higher education and noted the need for communication to present this complexity to the public and to develop understanding of what quality means (for students, families, employer and the media). The feasibility study could put emphasis on this pedagogical role.

22. Dorte Kristoffersen (APQN) warned that the term *learning outcomes* takes different meanings depending on the kind of stakeholders and area of the world being considered. The terminology used in some of the work of the AHELO feasibility study (e.g. the contextual dimension variables to be collected along performance measures) was questioned by the SCG. Karine Tremblay confirmed that the feasibility study will openly address issues of wording when reviewing the linguistic and cultural transferability of the instruments.

### ***The structure and scope of the feasibility study***

23. Roland Schneider (TUAC) and Monique Fouilhoux (EI) insisted on the inherent connections between the discipline skills and generic skills strands proposed by the feasibility study and warned against the risk of artificially separating them. In the same vein, as the participating countries chose the discipline-skills and generic skills strands rather than the contextual strand, they saw a risk that the feasibility study would focus on performance measurements only.

24. Karine Tremblay noted that the group of experts who sketched out the conceptual framework for the contextual dimension variables put emphasis on the interplay between the generic and disciplinary skills and the contextual dimension, and that this distinction was solely a practical solution for the sake of the feasibility study. If AHELO was to become a fully-fledged assessment, these various dimensions would come together. She also indicated that countries had expressed support for contextual data in the GNE, stressing that it would add essential analytic dimension to AHELO. As a result, this part of the work was no longer a distinct strand of work but had now become a dimension that will irrigate the economics-skills, engineering-skills and generic-skills assessment strands.

25. With respect to the contextual dimension, Monique Fouilhoux (EI) welcomed the interim report of specialist experts and in particular the involvement of the faculty members and leadership staff of participating institutions in the contextual surveys. She also indicated that her organization had comments on specific variables which would be shared in writing (see Annex 3).

26. Participants also sought clarification on the criteria used to select participating institutions within countries involved in the feasibility study. Karine Tremblay indicated that while the specific criteria to enable countries to make an appropriate selection of institutions were still to be resolved with the GNE,

this process would rely on the principle of voluntary participation by institutions while at the same time ensuring sufficient institutional diversity within each country.

27. Participants also discussed on the most appropriate units of analysis. Whereas the feasibility study selected the institutions as units of analysis, some participants indicated that most of the learning outcomes occur at the level of departments. Others thought that the student level was keen to appropriately appraise the quality of the learning outcomes. Karine Tremblay indicated that such an issue will be thoroughly discussed when drafting the terms of reference for the test.

28. Liam Burns (ESU) underlined that securing political buy-in is a major challenge for the feasibility study, and asked whether this aspect would be considered as a special strand in the feasibility study. Karine Tremblay indicated that the practicality of implementation and the degree of student and academic staff participation – although not being a separate strand in the terminology used in the project – would indeed be reviewed and reported on along the scientific feasibility of an AHELO. She also indicated that the Secretariat's efforts to enhance transparency and discuss the unfolding of the feasibility study with stakeholders were in themselves an indication that the political buy-in is being taken into consideration.

### *The use of the feasibility study*

29. The participants paid much attention to the use of the results of the AHELO feasibility study once the testing is completed. They were wary of the risks of using the results of the AHELO feasibility study for purposes other than testing the scientific and technical possibility to appraise learning outcomes at the international level. Due to the worldwide attention drawn on AHELO in the sector and the media, they felt there was a risk of misuse of the results.

30. Dorte Kristoffersen (APQN) highlighted the overwhelming demand for higher education in the Asia Pacific region, now and even more in the coming years (See Annex 3). The results of the feasibility study could be used as leverage to strengthen capacity building of the sector, especially regarding the preservation of the quality of programmes offered from a distance or exported, along with the development of student mobility within the region.

31. All participants agreed that the interpretation of the results is of paramount importance to ensure the soundness of the feasibility study. Without thorough and collaborative interpretations, the results might be subject to misinterpretation and instrumentalization. At the same time, they recognized that the variety of positions among themselves would be unlikely to lead to a consensual view.

32. In this context, Eva Egron-Polak (IAU) asked about the criteria that would be used to assess the success or failure of the feasibility study. Because AHELO is multi-dimensional, an array of various and documented reasons to pursue or to wrap-up might emerge. This would preclude from a unique conclusion and would favor instead multiple interpretations. Karine Tremblay informed participants that a major conference on the final results of the feasibility study should take place that would bring together technical experts, participating institutions, countries and the stakeholders to discuss the conclusions collaboratively. Richard Yelland (IMHE) stressed that there was no assumption that the feasibility study would conclude with a positive outcome and that whatever the findings they would need to be thoroughly discussed with providers, evaluators, beneficiaries, decision-makers and funders of higher education.

33. Participants welcomed the openness of the Secretariat with respect to the outcomes of the AHELO feasibility study, although some of them expressed fears that this project was 'too big to fail'. They also embraced the idea of a conference bringing various parties together to discuss the results, acknowledging that this was likely to increase the feeling of ownership for the conclusions irrespective of individual viewpoints.

## **Presentation of terms of reference for the SCG and discussion**

### ***Terms of reference***

34. Richard Yelland (IMHE) presented the draft terms of reference for the SCG as agreed by the GNE. He put emphasis on the significant role given by the GNE to the SCG, and on the distinction between the decision-making body (the GNE) and the consultative group (the SCG).

35. All participants welcomed the constitution of the SCG and were pleased to be involved in such a group at the very beginning of the project. They also pointed out the role of the SCG as an appropriate interface between higher education and the economic world.

36. The draft terms of reference, to be submitted for final approval to the GNE in April 2009, were welcomed by the SCG.

### ***Possible roles for the SCG***

37. Fabrice Hénard (IMHE) presented an array of possible areas of work for the SCG. The participants agreed that their contribution will depend on their will, their possibility and their capacity (financially and technically speaking). Hence the participation of each stakeholder will be flexible over time.

38. The participants underlined the difficulty of taking positions on behalf of their membership, as they lacked time to consult them, or the board of their organization. Bruno Curvale (ENQA) mentioned that systematic consultation of the membership may take time and bring about long discussions within the membership. The position taken by the stakeholders hence may not reflect a consensus-based opinion or an official statement of their membership.

39. Liam Burns (ESU) stated that the more ownership is given to the SCG, the more committed the participants are likely to be. While the participants would stay on technical issues as required by the draft terms of reference, the SCG could valuably provide a map reflecting a range of various opinions.

40. The participants expressed the will to communicate thoroughly with their membership on the aims and the unfolding of the AHELO feasibility study. They suggested:

- To receive the documents earlier so they can discuss them appropriately with their membership.
- To be provided with appropriate tools for communication (*e.g.* AHELO standard material).
- To spur the communication regarding the AHELO feasibility study. Judith Eaton (CHEA) suggested hosting a meeting of the SCG in the United States while Marie-Odile Ottenwaelter (INQAAHE) informed that INQAAHE had invited IMHE to present the AHELO feasibility study at its next Conference to be held in Abu Dhabi in March 2009.
- To communicate through an interactive and user-friendly platform for discussions, where information could be consulted.

41. All participants stated that participation is productive when time bounds and tasks are clear (*e.g.* due dates, explanation of the tasks to be achieved, easy to use forums, etc.). The tasks that might be proposed by the Secretariat to the SCG for reaction, questions and suggestions should be closely moderated by the Secretariat and should pass through a dedicated web platform. Email exchanges were not judged ideal for effective interaction.

## Points to be considered

42. Overall, a number of points emerged from the meeting that should be carefully considered by the Secretariat and the GNE in the unfolding of the AHELO feasibility study:

- Vocabulary: ensuring that the phrasing and wording used are well understood and carry similar meanings across languages and cultures. The feasibility study will need to explicitly address cultural and linguistic transferability and secure diversity when selecting participating institutions;
- Exploring additional dimensions of AHELO like:
  - the cost-benefit analysis of the feasibility study, of a full-fledged AHELO, for the institutions themselves; and
  - the political buy-in of the feasibility study.
- Investigating the appropriateness of sub-institutional level as optional supplement to the institution as unit of analysis;
- Paying attention to academic freedom and students' voice when administrating the tests;
- With respect to the unfolding of the feasibility study:
  - putting together standard material;
  - setting up a web-platform and appropriate moderation;
  - looking into ways of drawing on stakeholders' expertise in specialist groups within the project;
  - sending out the work documents in due time; and
  - limiting OECD jargon and gear the layout of documents accordingly.
- Next meeting milestones: autumn 2009 (before starting the testing and after the adjudication of contractors).

## **ANNEX 1 - PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR ACRONYMS**

- AASCU: American Association of State Colleges and Universities
- ACE: American council on Education
- APQN: Asia-Pacific Quality Network
- BIAC: Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the OECD
- CEMEET: Council of European Employers of the Metal, Engineering and Technology-based Industries
- CHEA: Council for Higher Education Accreditation (USA)
- EI: Education International
- ENQA: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- EURASHE: European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
- EEA: European Economic Association
- EUA: European University Association
- ESU: European Students' Union,
- IAU: International Association of Universities
- INQAAHE: International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
- SEFI: European Society for Engineering Education
- TUAC: Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD

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## ANNEX 3 – STAKEHOLDERS’ VIEWS ON THE AHELO FEASIBILITY STUDY AND/OR THE SCG MEETING

### THE LANDSCAPE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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#### Introduction

The Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) has been invited by OECD to join the Stakeholders’ Group to support the implementation of the feasibility study of the AHELO project. In this report APQN provides an overview of the quality assurance structures in place in the Asia-Pacific region including measures for assessment and measurement of learning outcomes.

#### Asia-Pacific Quality Network Inc.

The Asia-Pacific Quality Network has been in operation as a legal entity, incorporated in Melbourne, Australia, within the state of Victoria, since December 2004 where the Administration of the Network has also been located. From March 2009 the Administration will move the Shanghai Education Evaluation Institute in China.

The APQN region is defined as follows:

*‘All Pacific island nations and territories, New Zealand, Australia, Papua New Guinea; all island and mainland nations and territories of Asia, including Russia, Afghanistan, the other central Asian ‘stans and Iran, but excluding the Gulf states (which are covered by another network)’.*

At the end of 2008 APQN’s membership consisted of: 24 Full Members, 9 Intermediate Members, 5 Associate Members, 21 Institutional Members, and 7 Observers (QA bodies or bodies with an interest in quality assurance outside the region).

#### *Mission and Objectives*

APQN’s mission is ‘To enhance the quality of higher education in Asia and the Pacific region through strengthening the work of quality assurance agencies and extending the cooperation between them’.

The mission translates into the following objectives:

- to promote good practice in the maintenance and improvement of quality in higher education in the Asia-Pacific region

- to facilitate research in the region into the practice of quality management in higher education and its effectiveness in improving the quality of higher education in the region
- to provide advice and expertise to assist the development of new quality assurance agencies in the region
- to facilitate links between quality assurance agencies and acceptance of each others' decisions and judgements
- to assist members of APQN to determine standards of institutions operating across national borders
- to permit better-informed international recognition of qualifications throughout the region
- to assist in the development and use of credit transfer schemes to enhance the mobility of students between institutions both within and across national borders
- to enable members of APQN to be alert to dubious accrediting practices and organisations
- where appropriate, represent the region and promote the interests of the region, e.g. vis-à-vis other networks and international organisations

APQN strives to achieve its objectives through a range of methods, including:

- its website which has a public face and a site with access for members only
- dissemination of information through newsletters, documents, journals and books, whether in paper-based or electronic form
- training and development through seminars, workshops and conferences with support from the World Bank and Unesco and other external funding bodies
- reference to the databases and other resources of INQAAHE and other organisations

### **Main Characteristics of the Quality Assurance Mechanisms**

As can be seen from the definition of the Asia-Pacific region it spans a wide variety of countries in terms of size with respect to both landmass and population, culture and languages, economic development and not least maturity of the educational systems, including the quality assurance systems. This high level of diversity has an impact on the quality assurance arrangements in place as the national quality assurance arrangements have to be suited for the specific national contexts. In 2007 APQN was commissioned by the Task Force of the so-called Brisbane Communique Initiative supported by the Australian Government<sup>1</sup> (See section 4) to undertake a survey of the quality assurance arrangements in the broader Asia-Pacific region. The survey showed that the diversity in particular was reflected in terms of the establishment of the quality assurance agency, its ownership, legal basis, governance, funding and the level of independence of QA agencies. Correspondingly, the scope and the characteristics of quality assurance frameworks differ. Variations were identified in terms of the focus of the quality assurance measures (institution vs program), the nature of the QA process (mandatory vs voluntary), the aspects considered in the quality assurance process, the extent of the public disclosure of QA outcomes, and post-QA follow-up.

The survey also identified a number of common principles and good quality assurance practices that underpin most of the national quality assurance systems which have been established in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> DEEWR: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

Most of the countries, as reflected in APQN's membership numbers have systems of technical licensing/registration so there is a check of basic criteria for an institution to be operation and a growing number of countries are establishing more formal quality assurance systems aimed at assessing the quality of educational programmes or institutions, or a mix of both. Some countries in the region have several quality assurance bodies that cover various parts of higher education such as university education and non-university education, private or public higher education and professional and academic higher education or regional bodies. The main reasons for countries not having established external quality assurance agencies is smallness of the system, eg only one university, lack of resources and political obstacles.

The prevailing quality assurance approach is programme or institutional accreditation, ie an evaluation process that results in a clear determination whether the programme or institution has been accredited. Not only countries that have opted for accreditation but most of the QA approaches in place are based on pre-determined and publicly available criteria. The standards and/or criteria in operation are influenced by the unit of quality assurance, ie for programme level quality assurance the focus would normally be the quality of programme content and delivery and its graduates whereas institution level quality assurance would focus on the broader spectre of activities under the responsibility of the institution. With the emergence of qualifications frameworks, many of which are outcomes-based the programme level quality assurance there is likely to be an increasing emphasis on assessment of programme 'compliance' and/or the institutions' ability and capability to comply with the expected qualifications outcomes (see section 4 below).

According to generally agreed internal good practice the quality assurance processes operated are based on a combination of self study and peer review, ie the institution or program undergoing the quality assurance process is required to prepare a self evaluation report on how it meets the standards set or criteria identified by the agency. A panel of peers or experts within the scope of the quality assurance process more widely analyses the self study report of the institution and validates it through a site visit to the institution. The analysis of the self study report and the site visit leads to the preparation of report on the outcome of the quality assurance process. Based on the outcomes in the report and self evaluation report of the institution or program, the agency makes a final decision through an appropriate decision-making process.

In all the quality assurance approaches in place, there is an element of public disclosure of the outcome, although the extent of public disclosure varies from disclosure of only the decision, eg whether the program or institution has been accredited, as in the case of a typical accreditation, to disclosure of the whole report. It is also general practice that the outcome of the quality assurance exercise is valid for a specific period of time, typically five to ten years.

## **Major Emerging and Future Developments in the Region**

### ***Development of a regional Quality Assurance Framework and Principles of Quality Assurance in the Broader Asia-Pacific Region***

The Brisbane Communiqué (BC) initiative was launched at a meeting of Ministers and senior officials from 27 countries from across the broader Asia-Pacific region in Brisbane, in Australia on 3-4 April 2006. The common goal of the Brisbane Communiqué is to increase student and academic mobility and transferability of qualifications, and greater integration or exchangeability of education frameworks.

Towards this goal Ministers and senior officials identified four areas for collaboration:

1. quality assurance frameworks for the region linked to international standards, including courses delivered online;
2. recognition of educational and professional qualifications;

3. common competency based standards for teachers, particularly in science and mathematics; and,
4. development of common recognition of technical skills across the region in order to better meet the overall skills needs of the economic base of the region.

In terms of the quality assurance agenda, the task force among other things contracted APQN to do a scoping study on quality assurance arrangements in the region to identify issues, gaps and solutions already in existence and to recommend future directions (The report on Quality Assurance Arrangements in Higher Education in the Broader Asia-Pacific Region mentioned above). The conclusions in the report inspired the Task Force to initiate a discussion of a possible regional quality assurance framework on the one hand, and on the other hand common principles for quality assurance for higher education institutions and external quality assurance bodies alike.

The development of the quality assurance principles were inspired by existing similar guidelines such as the European Standards and Guidelines, The INQAAHE Principles of Good Practice and the OECD Policy Directions for Quality Assurance which is one of the outcomes of the OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education, the OECD Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-border Higher Education. A draft set of principles was discussed at a workshop in conjunction with the APQN Conference 2008 in Chiba, Japan. The discussions proved that the APQN member agencies generally saw value and relevance in the proposed principles but concluded that there was a need for adaption of some of them to the special national contexts and the regional context and that they need to be considered in the context of the broader quality assurance frameworks in place in most countries in the region. The outline of the quality assurance framework and the principles are shown in Appendix 1. As can be seen this framework is expected to include a framework of standards and qualifications and a quality assessment mechanism.

After the Chiba workshop, the principles were further commented by the APQN Board and the member agencies before being published by the BCI Task Force. APQN is now in the process of engaging its members in a process of further developing the principles to better fit the national context. The APQN members further agree that after this process there is a need to consult other stakeholders in education more broadly, primarily higher education institutions and students about the value and relevance of the principles.

### ***The emergence of Qualifications Frameworks***

The development of national qualifications framework (QFs) is currently a major theme internationally. Initially, the development of such frameworks was largely restricted to the British Commonwealth countries, such as Scotland, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Over the last decade this interest has extended to other parts of the world including countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

The OECD contributes this definition of qualifications framework:

*A qualifications framework is an instrument for the development and classification of qualification according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. This set of criteria may be implicit in the qualification descriptors themselves or made explicit in the form of a set level descriptors. The scope of frameworks may be comprehensive of all learning achievement and pathways or may be confined to a particular sector, for example, initial education, adult education and training or an occupational area. Some frameworks may have more design elements and a tighter structure than others; some may have a legal basis whereas others represent consensus of views of social partners. All qualifications frameworks, however, establish a basis for improving the quality, accessibility, linkages and public or labor market recognition of qualifications within a country and internationally.*

The 11 countries in the region with (known) established frameworks in 2007 have spelled out similar purposes for their frameworks.

- to provide consistent recognition of outcomes;
- to help develop flexible pathways between education and training sectors, and between
- these sectors and the labor market;
- to insure consistency in the use of qualification titles; and
- to provide reference for quality assurance reviews.

(APQN Project No 2, 2008)

According to a study by the South African Qualifications Authority the number of countries with qualifications frameworks ranging from the stage where they are starting out to an advanced stage have grown to 22 by September 2008 (J. Keevy, 2008) with the qualifications frameworks in Australian, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea being the most advanced and 15 of the 22 are just starting out. In the more advanced countries in particular Australia and New Zealand the quality assurance arrangements in place for higher education do include an assessment of outcomes but not uniquely learning outcomes, but outcomes in terms of institutional performance, ie graduate satisfaction, retention rates, graduate employment.

As most of the qualifications frameworks are only emerging there are no clear trends as to their link to quality assurance. If there is a link this is most likely to have an impact on the quality assurance processes applied due to the qualifications framework focus on learning outcomes.

In some countries the introduction of the qualifications framework is directly linked to a mechanism assuring the quality of the qualifications which may in some cases be integrated into the prevailing institutional or programme quality assurance process. If the former is the case the process tends to focus on checking the institution's ability to assess and ensure the quality of the qualifications and thus achievement of the prescribed outcomes against the elements included in the qualifications framework. If the latter is the case the quality assurance process tends to focus on a particular programme's compliance with the requirements of the elements in the framework, eg outcomes in the form of descriptors, qualification titles and credits in the qualifications framework.

This development toward a focus on outcomes drives the quality assurance process away from input and processes which characterises many quality assurance arrangements today. This change in focus cannot change without major educational reform particular with respect to programme design to support the delivery of outcomes based learning programme and adequate assessment methods as a means to assess the achievement of the learning programme.

As there developments are only recent and most of the countries are not at a very advanced stage the regional discussions are far from having reached a level where it is considered to or how to measure the outcomes as part of the quality assurance. The move towards an outcome driven education paradigm is creating challenges and a need for both higher education institutions and quality assurance bodies to consider their practices and activities.

## **Summary**

1. A majority of countries in the Asia-Pacific region have established one or more external quality assurance arrangements for higher education.

2. Despite a high degree of diversity in the region that influences the quality assurance arrangements there are also a range of similarities that are inspired by international good practice.
3. Many of the quality assurance arrangements include qualitative or quantitative standards or criteria. Learning outcomes are not generally included as quality assurance criteria although there is an emerging trends that countries which are introducing qualifications and where there is a directly link between the framework and the national quality assurance mechanism learning that outcomes are taken into consideration.
4. These basic characteristics of the quality assurance arrangements in the region has led to a discussion about the need for a joint regional quality assurance framework and shared quality assurance principles.

The feasibility study as proposed by OECD is welcome as it is likely to lead to a discussion of the value of the development of learning outcomes, their relevance for quality and how they can be used for information purposes. Such a discussion will no doubt have a positive impact on the ongoing discussion of the already ongoing developments in the Asia-Pacific region.

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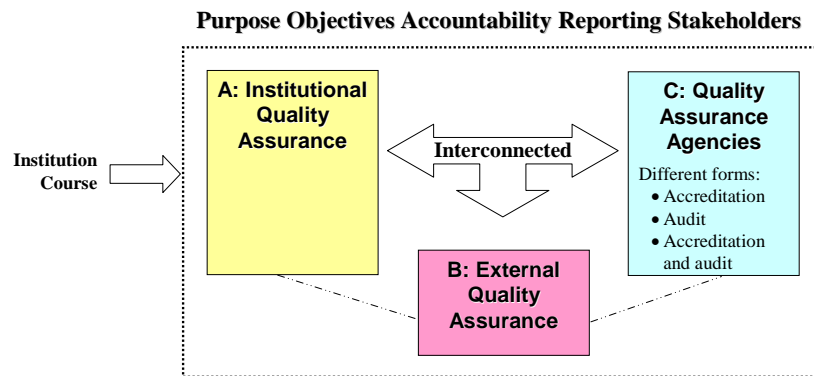
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**APPENDIX 1:**

**PROPOSED QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK AND PRINCIPLES**





Education International  
Internationale de l'Éducation  
Internacional de la Educación  
Bildungsinternationale

**Richard Yelland**  
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#### President

Thulas Nxesi

#### General Secretary

Fred van Leeuwen

Brussels 11 February 2009

Dear Richard Yelland,

On behalf of Educational International, I would like to take this opportunity as offered at the recent consultative group meeting to present our views on the AHELO feasibility study.

Since the AHELO project was first proposed as a “PISA” for higher education by OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría at the 2006 Education Ministerial meeting in Athens, EI has expressed concerns about the potential misuse and abuse of the instrument. We consulted widely with our members representing higher education and research staff. They warned of the difficulties of producing a standardized test that could provide reliable, cross-national, comparative data given the diversity of systems, institutions, admission standards, and languages across OECD countries. As well, it was feared that the test could be used by governments and other interests to produce a simplistic ranking of institutions rather than actually helping universities and colleges identify their different strengths and weakness. There is also the danger that AHELO could be used as a crude accountability mechanism by governments to reward good performers and punish the poor ones.

In our view, given the current feasibility study proposal, the contextual strand of AHELO is therefore critical and we support the intention not to pursue this as a stand-alone effort. Without accounting for key contextual variables, the generic and discipline skills outcomes will be of little use and will be open to serious misinterpretation. As such, we remain concerned that participating countries to date have expressed more interest in the two assessment strands of the study, underlining our concerns about the potential for misuse.

With reference to the report (EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2008)5) of the 24-25 November 2008 meeting of the group of national experts, we recognize the difficulty posed by the overwhelming number of potentially relevant variables that could be included. We do, however, strongly encourage the OECD to include information about important staffing issues in the feasibility study as these have direct bearings on the quality of teaching and learning. We are particularly encouraged to see that national experts have considered it important to include contextual data related to the use of fixed-term or adjunct faculty and student/faculty ratios. We would also encourage you to consider including a measure of faculty's self-assessment of their professional autonomy or academic freedom in developing course materials and pedagogical techniques as this may have a bearing on the dynamics of learning in the classroom.



The group of national experts has also identified teaching load as a potential variable, and we would certainly underline the importance of this. However, we think this needs to be expanded somewhat more to include other faculty duties, such as research requirements and administrative tasks. We have heard from our members that institutional pressures and reward structures require faculty to devote increasingly more time to research and administration and less to teaching. At the same time, including the total workload picture of faculty would better help indicate institutional reliance on teaching-only positions as opposed to the more traditional integration of teaching and research in the academic profession.

We are somewhat surprised that faculty-reported student learning outcomes were scored relatively low in the list of priorities identified in Table 2 of the report. We believe that teachers are best placed to judge and assess the cognitive and non-cognitive progress of their students.

Finally, we want to signal a note of caution about the measurement of employment outcomes as currently framed by the group of national experts. Measurements of graduate employment within his or her field of study are problematic as they are more difficult to measure in some subject areas than others. It may be easy to assess whether an engineering or architecture graduate is working in his or her field, but how do you determine whether philosophy or classics graduates are employed in jobs relevant to their fields of study? This may bias results in favour of professional and applied programs.

It may be possible to ask graduates whether they are using skills learned from their higher education in their current work, but this may in some cases reflect more upon over-qualification than upon the quality and relevance of education received. As well, graduates may be more likely to identify the relevance of practical and applied skills over the so-called and harder to identify “soft-skills” they have acquired and utilize in their employment. As such, this too may bias results toward certain disciplines and fields.

Once again, I thank you for the opportunity to offer our comments and criticisms. EI looks forward to continuing to contribute to the debate.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "M. Fouilhoux". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath.

Monique Fouilhoux  
Deputy General Secretary