



Secretary-General
Secrétaire général

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16 June 2015

Dear President Corbett Broad,
Dear President Davidson,

Thank you for your letter, in which you express concerns with the planned launch of the AHELO Main Study, more specifically related to the value proposition of the proposed study, the decision-making process and governance arrangements, and the cost of the study.

Since its inception in 2007, the AHELO study has provoked much debate and controversy. This is hardly surprising, since it is the first global initiative to assess the learning outcomes of higher education students. Many of the OECD's initiatives were first met with resistance and scepticism, while many have developed into truly global standards. This is true for the PISA study, which now is recognised as the global benchmark for the assessment of learning outcomes of 15 year-old students and of the quality of education systems in countries. While AHELO is not a copy of PISA, it will adopt an approach which is adapted to the specificities of higher education.

I welcome your endorsement of accountability, transparency and the assessment of learning outcomes. We also agree that the assessment of students' learning outcomes produces extremely valuable information for institutions and students alike. The feedback resulting from learning outcomes' assessment can help institutions improve both teaching and learning and, consequently, re-confirm the value of teaching as part of the institutions' mission, in addition to research.

An essential element in the value proposition of AHELO, our main point of divergence, is that institutionally focused assessments of learning outcomes have little value without any form of external benchmarking or comparative dimension. Today, students and graduates are competing in a global world where higher education qualifications and the skills which they embody give access to jobs, social status and well-being. Students and employers alike are looking for trustworthy measures of the value of these credentials. Increasingly, governments are also looking for reliable assessments of the capacity of their higher education systems to produce high-quality learning outcomes and skills.

Currently, we are not meeting the rightful expectations of either students, institutions, employers or governments, if the only measures we are able to provide are untrustworthy reputations or research and citation scores on which today's rankings are based. AHELO is built on the proposition that we have reached the point where we can safely claim that it is technically feasible to provide trustworthy assessments of students' learning outcomes. That was indeed the main conclusion of the AHELO Feasibility Study.

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President and CEO
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A benchmarking approach to assessing students' learning outcomes should in no way be confused with standardisation. The diversity of higher education institutions is an important and valuable good in itself. Any assessment will have to duly address and support institutional diversity. Respecting diversity is not contrary to understanding that there are many common elements in institutions' missions and in the kind of learning outcomes and skills embodied by tertiary education qualifications. After listening to employers, I found that they are less interested in the institutional or even disciplinary idiosyncrasies of the qualifications of students than in their generic competences, such as critical thinking, higher-order cognitive capacity or complex communication skills. The most recent conversations with the authorities of those countries interested in pursuing the AHELO Main Study indicated a preference to concentrate the assessment on such generic learning outcomes.

With regard to the decision-making process and the governance arrangements envisaged by the AHELO Main Study, I can reassure you of our commitment to transparency. After the AHELO Feasibility Study was completed in 2012, we respected the wish of countries to carefully reflect on whether or not to pursue the Main Study. Thus, the OECD Secretariat submitted proposals for discussion in the Education Policy Committee. Not all countries agreed to proceed with the study; however, many support it, and many others are in the process of deciding. Although the debate is intense, the process itself is completely transparent.

When the AHELO Main Study is launched, the appropriate governance structures will be put in place. Countries supporting the Main Study have clearly expressed their preference for a governance structure which aligns decision-making with financial responsibilities. At the same time, they also acknowledge the necessity to continue the dialogue with the academic community. Current plans include establishing an Academic Advisory Group formed by representatives of the academic community of participating countries.

The AHELO Main Study will also rely on the participating countries when deciding on the methodology, the assessment instruments, the implementation and the resulting costing of the project. The OECD Secretariat has developed proposals based on the current state of the discussions, but many details remain to be determined, which is why the current proposal leaves many questions unanswered. Any assessment of the project's methodology must address these decisions which are to be taken by participating countries. The same is true regarding the costing of the project. Therefore, I feel as though any judgment on these issues is premature and would do injustice to the countries that want to move forward, making their own decisions and pursuing their own best interests. The OECD's duty is to support these countries.

Yours sincerely,

Angel Gurría