Issues paper: Informal Meeting of OECD Education Ministers on Evaluating the Outcomes of Higher Education

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This document sets out the issues for discussion at the informal meeting of OECD Education Ministers invited by MEXT to discuss evaluating the outcomes of Higher Education.

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EVALUATING THE OUTCOMES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Session 1: Society’s expectations of higher education

Higher education has grown and diversified in recent decades. In the knowledge society it is a strategic investment for Governments and for individuals. Society therefore has high expectations of higher education.

The outcomes\(^1\) of higher education are several, and no two institutions are the same. Graduates are expected to be both highly-skilled in their discipline, and sufficiently broadly educated to be employable in a wide range of jobs. Research and innovation are expected to be relevant to the needs of society and the economy, while meeting international standards of excellence. And now that higher education is no longer the pursuit of a minority of young people but a necessity for the majority for active participation in economic life, higher education institutions are expected to contribute to the economic, social and cultural development of the regions in which they are located.

Moreover Governments and other stakeholders expect these various outcomes: producing basic research, transferring technology, conserving and communicating culture, educating young – and not so young - students in academic subjects, and engaging with wider society – to be produced with efficiency, fairness and to a high standard. Governments have therefore been turning increasingly to evaluation as a way of assessing and improving the quality of outcomes.

In this opening session discussion will focus on the changing expectations of higher education systems and institutions.

*How are the diverse societal expectations of higher education articulated by Government and by the higher education institutions themselves?*

*How well are they understood by business and the outside world?*

*Are these various expectations adequately reflected in Government policy regarding higher education?*

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\(^1\) Outcomes in this paper mean the changes brought about by higher education, the impact that it has on individuals and on society
Session 2: National experiences with evaluating the quality of higher education outcomes

In the past twenty years quality assurance in higher education has been strengthened in almost all OECD countries. There is a common reliance on self-evaluation by institutions combined with peer review. And most countries incorporate some quantitative indicators. Nevertheless the understanding of what is meant by quality, and the extent to which evaluation is externally- rather than internally-driven, vary widely.

Evaluation of outcomes – rather than inputs or processes - is a narrower concept than quality assurance or accreditation and can provide crucial information for policy making, for institutional improvement, and for students, their families and employers.

The evaluation of outcomes does not come without challenges. Innovation and learning are concepts that are especially difficult to assess: the use of simplistic measures can create distorting incentives to higher education institutions, leading some to play the system; subtler methodologies can become over-bureaucratic and lead to resentment and opposition.

In this session discussion will focus on how and why countries have taken initiatives to evaluate the outcomes of higher education.

What initiatives at national level have been introduced to evaluate the quality of higher education outcomes in research, teaching and learning, and economic and social development?

How successful have these been?

Are the results published to improve transparency or provided only to particular institutions in order to encourage development?

Session 3: Applying evaluation to policy and practice

Evaluation which has no consequences is wasteful – it must be followed through. But follow-up can have two purposes – it can inform and enable improvement, but it can also be a tool for accountability, to Government and or to society.

Evaluation can be linked to rankings of higher education institutions. The Berlin Principles provide a framework for the conduct and development of rankings but they have little impact on those who interpret them. Rankings are becoming more numerous and their influence – on institutions and on prospective students and employers - is pervasive, but they are only as good as the information on which they based. More recently, several international rankings of institutions have been developed and are attracting widespread attention.

While the share of public and private expenditure on higher education differs from country to country, a significant proportion of funding comes from the public purse. Higher education

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2 Evaluation is the process of establishing a judgement based on evidence about the extent to which a system or element meets its objectives or purposes

3 Developed by the International Rankings Expert Group initiated by UNESCO-CEPES and IHEP.
institutions need to increase their accountability to demonstrate to society and those concerned that they meet expectations. Nevertheless the use of evaluation to reward good performance or to sanction unsatisfactory performance through funding – whether directly or indirectly - is rare.

This session will focus on the uses that are made of evaluation.

What more can be done to increase public understanding of rankings and to ensure that they reflect the range of purposes of higher education?

What has been the impact of rankings?

What has been the experience of countries in linking funding to performance – explicitly or indirectly?

What evidence is there that evaluation of outcomes helps improve the effectiveness of higher education?

Session 4: Possibilities for assessing higher education learning outcomes

While the importance of assessing learning outcomes has been acknowledged, few countries have concrete experience, and even where such attempts have been made the exercise has not been systematic.

If the international comparison of higher education institutions is inevitable, it may be possible to improve the information on which it is based. Assessment of learning outcomes could be a part of this improvement. The experience of PISA for the 15 year-old population, and the plans for PIACC for adults, are encouraging. The view of international experts consulted by the OECD is that an international study on assessment of learning outcomes could contribute to increased accountability and improvement of assessment methods of learning outcomes by governments, institutions and quality assurance agencies.

A standardized international test method could address only a few aspects of learning outcomes and a feasibility study would be required to explore the practicality of assessing both the generic skills required for employment in the knowledge society, and the specific skills acquired in some disciplines. It would aim to take into account of the historical and cultural context, and the differences that exist between countries in curricula, duration of study and enrolment rates. Students and institutions must be motivated to participate.

What initiatives have been introduced – nationally and internationally - to assess learning outcomes?

What have been the main challenges?

Does the proposed OECD international assessment of student learning outcomes in higher education offer a way forward?

In what other ways can OECD help countries with the evaluation of higher education outcomes?