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**Group of National Experts on the AHELO Feasibility Study**

**OECD FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR AN ASSESSMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING  
OUTCOMES (AHELO): PROGRESS REPORT AND WORK PLAN FOR 2009-10**

**Paris, 17-18 December 2008**

*The AHELO GNE is invited to COMMENT on, and TAKE NOTE of this progress report.*

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**OECD FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR AN ASSESSMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING  
OUTCOMES (AHELO):  
PROGRESS REPORT AND WORK PLAN FOR 2009-10.**

1. The purpose of this document is to:
  - Update members of the AHELO Group of National Experts (GNE) with progress to date on the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) feasibility study; and
  - Inform the GNE of the outcomes of the AHELO discussions with the IMHE Governing Board on 5-6 November 2008.
2. The AHELO GNE is invited to COMMENT on, and TAKE NOTE of this progress report.

**Objectives of the AHELO feasibility study**

3. The objective of the AHELO feasibility study is to demonstrate the feasibility – or otherwise – of comparing higher education institutions' (HEIs) performance from the perspective of student learning rather than relying upon research-based measures which are currently being used across the globe as overall proxies of institutional quality.
4. The feasibility study will assess the scientific and practical feasibility of assessing what undergraduate degree students know and can do across a range of different institutions, countries, cultures and linguistic backgrounds. The overarching goal is to provide better information to HEIs, governments, and other stakeholders including students and employers. The main motivation is that this information could contribute to HEIs' knowledge of their teaching performance, and thereby provide a tool for development and improvement.
5. The feasibility study will have to accomplish two things:
  - Test the science of the assessment – whether it is possible to devise an assessment of the outcomes of higher education which enables to make reliable statements about the performance/effectiveness of learning in institutions of very different types, and in countries with different cultures and languages; and
  - Test the practicality of implementation and of motivating institutions and students to take part in such an assessment.

**Directions of the work**

***Several strands of work***

6. A summary of the main directions of the work to be undertaken as part of the AHELO feasibility study is provided below. A more detailed description is provided in the 'roadmap' for the feasibility study which was circulated to all OECD countries in July 2008 [EDU/IMHE/GB(2008)7]. The roadmap was put

together following the advice of experts that met on three occasions in 2007 to provide guidance for a strategy [see EDU(2007)8, EDU(2007)9 and EDU(2007)14].

7. In practical terms, the feasibility study will assess whether it is possible to directly measure or indirectly capture various facets of learning outcomes and different aspects of quality. This will be done through several strands of work to be carried out independently but coherently. First, the feasibility study will consider different types of assessment instruments to measure learning outcomes directly, and explore their validity in an international context. In this respect, the feasibility study will embrace a wide spectrum of learning outcomes with both a **generic skills strand** and a **discipline strand** where two pilot disciplines will be covered (**engineering** and **economics**). But summative measures of learning outcomes are only one facet of quality, so the feasibility study will also explore outcomes measures in terms of **value-added**. Finally, a **contextual strand** of work will explore the development of indirect measures and contextual information indicators at institutional level, in recognition of the need for a multi-dimensional approach to higher education quality. The various strands of work can thus be summarized as follows:

- Strand 1 – Direct assessment of generic skills;
- Strand 2 – Direct assessment of discipline-specific skills, including
  - Economics discipline; and
  - Engineering discipline;
- Strand 3 – Measurement of value-added in higher education (no direct assessment for the feasibility study phase); and
- Strand 4 – Contextual indicators and indirect assessment of higher education quality.

***A limited number of countries and HEIs per strand, with due consideration for diversity***

8. A critical aspect of the AHELO feasibility study is to test how AHELO instruments translate across different types of HEIs and systems, and to assess whether the resulting measures of learning outcomes are reliable and valid across countries, cultures, languages and institutional types. It will therefore be important to involve a diversity of HEIs and countries in the feasibility study, in particular with respect to the higher education system organisation, language of instruction, geographic coverage, cultural background, as well as the types of HEIs covered.

9. At the same time, given that the AHELO feasibility study only aims at providing a proof of concept, the number of participating countries and HEIs involved in each strand can be limited. As a result, and in order to maximise information gains while recognising the need to ensure a broad geographic and linguistic coverage, it is proposed to involve about 3-6 countries and 10 HEIs within each country in each strand of work involving the piloting of instruments – *i.e.* Strands 1, 2 and 4. This number is large enough to assess the measurement properties of the various instruments but small enough to keep the process manageable and avoid that validity gains are sacrificed over efficiency gains. This approach also allows the involvement of a larger number of countries and HEIs in the overall feasibility study, thereby contributing to a broader sense of ownership for the outcomes of the feasibility study.

*A target population of students towards the end of their first (3 to 4 years) degree*

10. Finally, with respect to the target population, the AHELO feasibility study aims at measuring the learning outcomes of students at the end of a 3 or 4 years' degree. The feasibility study will ensure that the testing window is such that response rates are not jeopardised by end-of-year examinations.

11. The AHELO feasibility study will not assess the knowledge and skills of students starting a degree programme. The OECD recognises that the measurement of value-added would ideally require testing cohorts of entering students as well, or following-up students over time, but these options are beyond the scope of this feasibility study due to time constraints. An alternative for the feasibility study is therefore to explore the issue of value-added measurement conceptually, but also empirically through the analysis of existing datasets deriving from national assessments of learning outcomes.

**Progress report**

*Institutional framework*

12. Following an informal Ministerial meeting in January 2008, work during the first part of the year concentrated on developing the broad strategy for the AHELO feasibility study, and for gaining stakeholder commitment. A project manager was hired in late March and started working on the project full-time in early May.

13. The institutional framework to launch the AHELO feasibility study has now been put in place, with the preparation of a roadmap for the activity [EDU/IMHE/GB(2008)7], the transfer of responsibilities for this output to the IMHE Governing Board as of 2008 [BC(2008)22], the establishment of an AHELO Group of National Experts [CE(2008)17], the development of a Web page to ease communications and dissemination with outside parties [see [www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo](http://www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo) or [www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo-fr](http://www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo-fr)] and the recruitment of participating countries [EDU/IMHE/GB(2008)8].

14. In terms of human resources within the Secretariat two analysts and a communication analyst are to be involved in the feasibility study on a part-time basis, and a full-time project and budget assistant has been hired as of mid-October. In addition, the recruitment of a full-time analyst/psychometrician is currently underway to work on the more technical aspects of the study.

*Communication and dissemination activities*

15. There has been considerable Press interest in AHELO from the earliest days and this has generated high expectations and some misunderstanding of the OECD's intentions. Efforts have been made to respond to enquiries, to clarify the objectives of the feasibility study and to involve a range of actors and stakeholders in order to develop understanding of and support for AHELO. To this end, initial communications with experts and stakeholders groups have been established through various conferences and meetings, with an aim to enhance transparency and understanding of the AHELO objectives by all parties.

16. In particular, a number of stakeholders' associations have been approached to join an AHELO 'Stakeholders' Consultative Group' to share information on AHELO progress with stakeholders, and to exchange views on its implementation as a preliminary step towards discussions of the potential impact of a fully-fledged AHELO if the feasibility study is a success. A first meeting of this AHELO 'stakeholders' consultative group' is foreseen towards early February 2009 to update stakeholders with progress of the feasibility study plans and directions of the work.

***Fundraising activities***

17. Meanwhile, fundraising activities are also underway to secure financial support for the AHELO feasibility study from both participating countries and foundations. The total estimated costs for the feasibility study have been estimated at 14 650 K EUR [EDU/IMHE/GB(2008)7, Annex I]. From this, about half is to be raised from a range of different organisations and foundations with an interest or stakes in the quality of higher education. Initial steps have been taken with a number of foundations in the United States, Europe and Japan.

18. However, the current climate of uncertainty surrounding the global financial crisis is affecting foundations just like the private sector, and is likely to make funding for cutting-age innovation projects like AHELO more difficult to obtain. Fundraising activities will therefore extend into 2009, so that current instability does not harm fundraising efforts due to foundations boards' cautious reactions.

***Country participation***

19. With respect to country participation, ten countries have formally indicated interest in participation as of 4 December, namely Australia, the Flemish community of Belgium, Finland, Italy, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Some 1 500 K EUR in voluntary contributions have been committed for the 2009-10 biennium. Discussions are currently underway with several other countries and the final number of AHELO participants is expected to fall between 12 and 15.

**Substantive work*****Current activities***

20. Discussions are currently underway with a number of individual specialists and experts to contribute to the meeting of the AHELO Group of National Experts, and/or prepare background documentation for discussion at the meeting. In particular, a number of experts have been contracted to define conceptual frameworks of indicators that ought to be captured through AHELO, as a prerequisite to subsequent instrument development.

21. Such conceptual frameworks of indicators will be developed for the contextual strand, drawing upon the know-how of experts involved in the German CHE surveys, the US National Survey of Student Engagement, and other researchers involved in research on performance analysis and 'what works' issues.

22. Likewise, conceptual frameworks will be developed for the discipline-specific strand, by convening a number of experts from diverse countries to collectively reach consensus and agree on a definition of desired/expected learning outcomes in engineering and in economics. In order to reach international agreement on desired/expected learning outcomes in the disciplines, it is proposed that the AHELO feasibility study follows the TUNING approach that has been successfully applied in Europe for other disciplines, and simply broadens its geographical basis to include experts from North America and the Asia-Pacific region. Discussions are underway with the TUNING experts to manage this process. They will present their methodology and share their strategy with the AHELO GNE at its meeting in December.

23. In the case of generic skills, the discussions that took place with a number of international experts in 2007 suggest that the need for a conceptual framework for generic skills is less relevant. Indeed, the summary records of these discussions indicate that with respect to transversal higher-order competencies (critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem-solving or the generation of knowledge and the interaction between substantive and methodological expertise), "the kind of competencies to be covered and the methods to be employed could be similar to those used for the *Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)*

Project” [EDU(2007)8, §15]. The CLA methodology as well as the rationale for the experts’ recommendation to pilot this instrument for the AHELO feasibility study will be discussed with the GNE at its meeting in December with a view to decide whether to follow experts’ recommendation and go ahead with an international pilot of this instrument.

### ***Work plan***

24. The work plan for the AHELO feasibility is to a large extent to be decided and agreed upon with AHELO participating countries at their first meeting on 17-18 December.

25. However, the scale of the work to be undertaken as part of the AHELO feasibility study as well as the significant costs involved with instrument development in the various strands of work will require extensive sub-contracting of instrument development and operational activities. In this respect, it is proposed to proceed for AHELO, as in PISA and PIAAC, with a tendering process outlining activities to be undertaken in distinct components of the feasibility study as well as technical requirements for each one of them. This tendering process would allow research, assessment or consultancy organisations to bid for all or parts of the feasibility study components. The distinct components that would be considered in this respect would include:

- The development of instruments for the contextual strand of work, including their translation and cultural adaptation;
- The development and implementation of instruments for an assessment of learning outcomes in engineering, including:
  - Development of assessment material and instruments, incorporating material from the contextual strand in the background questionnaire;
  - Sampling activities and preparation of guidelines for survey implementation;
  - Translation and cultural adaptations of engineering instruments;
  - Development of a computer web-based platform for electronic delivery;
  - Monitoring of operational activities in the engineering strand of work; and
  - Data cleaning and analysis.
- The development and implementation of instruments for an assessment of learning outcomes in economics, including
  - Development of assessment material and instruments, incorporating material from the contextual strand in the background questionnaire;
  - Sampling activities and preparation of guidelines for survey implementation;
  - Translation and cultural adaptations of economics instruments;
  - Development of a computer web-based platform for electronic delivery;
  - Monitoring of operational activities in the engineering strand of work; and

- Data cleaning and analysis.

26. The timeline for the AHELO feasibility study will also be discussed at the GNE meeting in December. The Secretariat will circulate options for discussion to that end.

**ANNEX: DRAFT SUMMARY RECORD OF AHELO DISCUSSIONS AT THE 5-6  
NOVEMBER 2008 MEETING OF THE IMHE GOVERNING BOARD**

1. Item 9 was presented by Karine Tremblay, who provided an overview of the project and a description of the various strands of work involved in the feasibility study, updated the Governing Board on AHELO current status, activities and work plan. She also asked the Governing Board to note and comment on the broad directions of the work, the strategy for communication and fundraising, and to clarify the breakdown of responsibilities with the AHELO Group of National Experts (GNE). A lively discussion followed, in which three main issues emerged:

- The Governing Board raised questions on the governance of the AHELO feasibility study and on how the joint steering of the project by both governments – who initiated it – and HEIs – whose buy-in is essential to its success – could be implemented in practice. Some participants expressed doubts on the capacity of the Governing Board to manage the details of this project and were willing to delegate operational issues to the Group of National Experts, while others expressed discomfort with delegating decisions while retaining overall responsibility. The Secretariat reminded the Governing Board that the AHELO GNE was a subsidiary body of – hence accountable to – the IMHE Governing Board, while it also reported to the Education Policy Committee. Overall, participants felt that there was a need to delegate technical and operational decisions to the AHELO GNE but also to build a bridge between the subsidiary body and its parent to ensure coherence in terms of policy steering, possibly through the participation of IMHE Governing Board’s Chair in meetings of the AHELO GNE, or through a common Chair for both bodies. At the same time, participants also stressed the importance of involving HEIs in the feasibility study, and welcomed the participation of institutions in the Stakeholders’ Consultative Group to address potential fears. Overall, AHELO was perceived by participants as the first real-life test of IMHE’s own joint governance structure, as well as of its relationship with the Education Policy Committee, and it was noted by the Chair that this fuelled a feeling of both challenge as well as ambition.
- The Governing Board raised questions on the timeline of the project and expressed concerns with the workload and risks associated with the tight timeline compared to other similar large scale assessments like PISA or PIAAC. Some participants noted that while this was only a feasibility study, there were not many well-developed models to assess higher education learning outcomes, and they warned against the dangers of rushing the feasibility study into implementation too fast. The main concerns were that doing it too fast could lead to perverse outcomes, *e.g.* forcing the Secretariat to apply existing instruments and being subsequently criticised for these choices, or steering AHELO in specific directions for the longer term by giving some competitive advantage to the models piloted. Some participants also stressed that rushing could impair decisions on further steps if the models applied were not good enough, or raise expectations that this may deliver more than just a proof of concept. Overall, there was a feeling that the timeline should be carefully reviewed by the AHELO Group of National Experts.
- Finally the Governing Board discussed the proposal to seek derogation from the OECD tendering process for the generic skills strand in order to carry out an international pilot of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). The Governing Board asked the Secretariat clarification on the

composition of the 2007 experts groups which recommended the CLA and sought more information on the evidence for reaching this conclusion and on the instruments ruled out. Overall, there was a feeling that the experts' recommendation could be followed but the final word should rest with the AHELO Group of National Experts.

2. The IMHE Governing Board:

- NOTED the creation and the mandate of the AHELO Group of National Experts, INVITED the Group of National Experts to report its conclusions regarding the allocation of participating countries to the various strands of work to the Governing Board for approval by written procedure within one week of the relevant discussion and AGREED to delegate technical and operational decisions regarding the AHELO feasibility study to the AHELO Group of National Experts;
- NOTED that the Chair of the IMHE GB would be invited to meetings of the AHELO Group of National Experts.
- COMMENTED on the broad directions of the work as outlined in the AHELO roadmap [EDU/IMHE/GB(2008)7] and document [EDU/IMHE/GB(2008)12], and on the division of the work in distinct strands of work each involving a small number of countries and HEIs;
- COMMENTED on the proposed communication and dissemination strategy, NOTED the establishment of an AHELO Stakeholders' Consultative Group and EMPHASISED the importance of timely and transparent consultation in order to secure buy-in and support from the sector;
- COMMENTED on the proposed fundraising strategy and INVITED the AHELO Group of National Experts to advise the Secretariat on how best to secure financial support for the AHELO feasibility study;
- In the light of experts' views on the generic skills strand, and subject to confirmation from the Group of National Experts, AGREED to seek a derogation from the OECD tendering process on the grounds that there is a unique supplier to carry out an international pilot of the Collegiate Learning Assessment; and AGREED on the tendering strategy for the AHELO feasibility study overall;
- NOTED the tentative timeline for the AHELO feasibility study.