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EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2009)1/FINAL

Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Économiques
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

22-Nov-2010

English text only

**DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNING BOARD**

Group of National Experts on the AHELO Feasibility Study

**FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING
OUTCOMES (AHELO): PROGRESS REPORT**

27-28 April 2009
OECD Conference Centre, 2 rue André-Pascal, 75016 Paris

The AHELO GNE discussed this document at its meeting in April 2009 and agreed to declassify it in this version.

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JT03292960

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**FEASIBILITY STUDY FOR THE ASSESSMENT
OF HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING OUTCOMES (AHELO):
PROGRESS REPORT - (ABRIGED VERSION)**

Policy environment

1. There is no reliable information which enables comparative judgements to be made about the competences of students in different countries and different institutions, or about the quality of teaching. The reputation of higher education institutions (HEIs) is based largely on historical research performance, and international rankings are distorting decision-making by individuals, institutions and Governments.

Project summary

2. The purpose of the feasibility study is to gauge whether an AHELO is scientifically and practically feasible. For the sake of a feasibility study, it is not necessary to develop a comprehensive – almost final – assessment. Instead, it is actually possible to take advantage of the feasibility study to explore different approaches, methodologies and instruments that might eventually be envisaged as parts of a fully-fledged assessment. As a result, the work is divided in 4 distinct strands of work to be undertaken separately but coherently.

3. First, the AHELO feasibility study will involve 3 small scale pilots of instruments to assess *generic skills* and discipline-specific assessments in two disciplines (*engineering* and *economics* have been chosen for the feasibility study). Each international pilot is expected to involve about 10 HEIs from 4-5 countries representing a breadth of languages, cultures and geographic backgrounds, to assess the international validity and reliability of the instruments used. As part of each of these assessments, contextual data as well as indirect proxies of quality will be collected to add essential analytic dimensions to AHELO, and to underline the potential danger of conducting an outcomes assessment without taking account of systemic, institutional and individual characteristics.

4. In addition to these assessment pilots and the contextual dimension embedded into them, another strand of work will explore the issue of *value-added measurement in higher education* – i.e. the learning gain that takes place during the higher education experience irrespective of previous abilities. This question will be addressed by researchers, both from a conceptual perspective and through a psychometric analysis of existing datasets. This last strand of work is deemed to provide input for the longer term development of an AHELO, should the feasibility study demonstrate the scientific and practical viability of such an endeavour.

Outputs

5. The purpose of the AHELO feasibility study is to assess whether it is possible to measure what undergraduate degree students know and can do at the international level. This will entail an evaluation of the scientific feasibility of undertaking an international assessment of higher education learning outcomes (in generic and subject-specific skills) at the end of a Bachelor degree programme, as well as gauging the feasibility of its practical implementation.

6. Several outputs from the AHELO feasibility study are envisaged:

- Two reports on the feasibility of developing international assessment frameworks in higher education, *i.e.* reaching international agreement on the definition of expected learning outcomes in the two disciplines chosen for the feasibility study (economics and engineering) in a cross-national fashion;
- Three reports on the scientific and practical feasibility of implementing an international assessment of higher education learning outcomes focusing on 1) generic skills, 2) discipline-specific skills in economics and 3) discipline-specific skills in engineering;
- One report on the measurement of value-added in higher education – *i.e.* the learning gain of students attributable to the teaching and learning that took place in a specific institution, net of students' incoming abilities and differences in institutional selectivity;
- A final conference and its proceedings to discuss the outcomes of the feasibility study as well as the potential impact of an AHELO.

7. In addition to these concrete outputs, a less tangible potential outcome of the feasibility study process could be an enhanced understanding of the project by the different groups of stakeholders and a strengthened political support provided the process succeeds in securing stakeholders' buy-in of the AHELO objectives.

Communication and dissemination activities

8. From its early days, AHELO has faced significant attention from the higher education community and the media and has endured significant misconceptions with regards to the objectives of the feasibility study. In order to clarify these misunderstandings, efforts have been made to respond to enquiries and involve a range of actors and stakeholders through various conferences and meetings, with an aim to enhance transparency and understanding of the AHELO objectives by all parties.

9. In particular, a number of stakeholders' associations have been approached to join an AHELO Stakeholders' Consultative Group (SCG) to streamline communication 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 SCG was held on 4 February 2009.

10. Meanwhile, dissemination about AHELO has been pursued through participation of the Secretariat in a number of wide-audience events.

Fundraising

11. Initial efforts in terms of fundraising have focused on the identification of potential funders of the AHELO feasibility study work, *i.e.* Organisations and Foundations which either have funded OECD work on education in the past, or which in light of their profile and interests might be interested in taking the AHELO work forward.

12. However, the current climate of uncertainty surrounding the global financial crisis is affecting foundations as well as the private sector, and is making funding for innovative projects like AHELO more difficult to obtain. With the AHELO feasibility study now taking shape, the Secretariat is reactivating

contacts with Foundations and Organisations, in order to report back to the AHELO Group of National Experts by mid-2009.

Progress on substantive work

Generic skills strand

13. On the generic skills strand, the GNE agreed to go ahead with the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)

Discipline-specific strands in economics and engineering

14. On the discipline-specific strands in engineering and economics, the GNE stressed the importance for AHELO to define learning outcomes to be measured *ex-ante*, and was impressed with the Tuning approach in this respect. Accordingly, the OECD Secretariat contracted the Tuning Association .

15. To reach agreement on expected learning outcomes, the Tuning Association was requested to involve academics from a broader geographic basis than previous Tuning work (which was essentially Europe-based), and in particular to involve experts from the Asia-Pacific and North American regions. This shall ensure that the outcomes of this work will reflect a cross-national agreement on expected learning outcomes that is more representative of the OECD membership and other significant players in the higher education arena worldwide.

16. Besides the Tuning-AHELO project, the Secretariat is also working on the development of terms of reference for an AHELO call for tender.

Contextual dimension

17. For the AHELO feasibility study, collecting contextual data is important even though the feasibility study does not aim at publishing actual results for participating institutions. Indeed, while results shall not be published, it is nevertheless important to assess the feasibility of collecting the contextual information that would be needed to help institutions understand the performance of their students and improve their teaching accordingly. It is equally important to try out the statistical analyses that will be needed to do so. These analyses may be particularly relevant at the institutional level, as one direct benefit of taking part in the feasibility study.