

Unclassified

EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2008)3/FINAL

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

22-Nov-2010

English - Or. English

DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNING BOARD

Group of National Experts on the AHELO Feasibility Study

PROPOSAL FOR THE ALLOCATION OF PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES TO THE VARIOUS STRANDS OF WORK FOR THE AHELO FEASIBILITY STUDY

Paris, 17-18 December 2008

This document was discussed by the GNE at its meeting in December 2008 and the GNE agreed to declassify it in this version.

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JT03292928

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PROPOSAL FOR THE ALLOCATION OF PARTICIPATING COUNTRIES TO THE VARIOUS STRANDS OF WORK FOR THE AHELO FEASIBILITY STUDY

1. The aim of this paper is to provide a proposal for the allocation of participating countries to the various strands of work of the feasibility study for an Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO).

2. The GNE is invited to FINALISE and ADOPT this proposal, which will be submitted to the IMHE Governing Board for final approval under written procedure within one week of the relevant discussion [see EDU/IMHE/GB/M(2008)2].

Background: AHELO four strands of work

3. OECD countries are in agreement that more needs to be known about the quality and outcomes of higher education, although there is debate on whether it is possible to measure learning outcomes across different types of higher education institutions, countries, languages and cultures. To answer this question, they launched a study to assess the feasibility of an international Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes.

4. The AHELO feasibility study sets out to determine whether it is possible to make a meaningful comparison of what students in different countries, speaking different languages and with very different systems of higher education, have learned by the time they complete a bachelor degree. The underlying motivation is that this information could contribute to higher education institutions' (HEIs) knowledge of their own teaching performance, and thereby provide a tool for development and improvement.

5. Three meetings of international experts were held in 2007 to define the scope of the task and provide guidance on a strategy and how an AHELO could be developed [see EDU(2007)8, EDU(2007)9 and EDU(2007)14]. These experts' advice provided the basis for the development of a roadmap outlining the main directions of the work to be undertaken as part of the feasibility study [see EDU/IMHE/GB(2008)7].

6. One key element in this respect is that the study solely aims at providing a proof of concept of the feasibility of measuring learning outcomes across different HEIs, countries, languages and cultures. As a result, it is possible for the feasibility study to explore different types of learning outcomes separately – albeit coherently – with a view to determine whether such a comparison is scientifically and practically possible in each area.

7. The AHELO feasibility study will thus involve small scale pilots of different types of instruments seeking to assess different types of learning outcomes. Although they can all be seen as semi-independent assessments for the feasibility study stage, they would need to be developed in such a way that they could be subsequently combined into a single instrument, should the feasibility study be successful and develop into a fully-fledged assessment in the longer term.

8. As described in the AHELO roadmap, four strands of work are envisaged and are to be undertaken separately but coherently. The first focuses on an assessment of generic skills while the second

seeks to assess discipline-specific skills with two pilot disciplines in engineering and economics. The measurement of value-added or contribution of HEIs to students' outcomes is the focus of a third strand – albeit without piloting of instruments due to time constraints. Finally, a fourth strand of work focuses on contextual measures and indirect indicators of higher education quality.

9. Altogether, four types of instruments are to be piloted in participating countries as part of the AHELO feasibility study:

- An assessment of generic skills;
- An assessment of discipline-specific skills in engineering;
- An assessment of discipline-specific skills in economics; and
- A measurement of contextual measures and indirect indicators of higher education quality.

Criteria to consider in the allocation of participating countries to the various strands

10. The main criteria to assess the success of the feasibility study would be to demonstrate that the various instruments considered can be applied in diverse institutional, cultural and linguistic settings and yet provide valid, reliable and free-of-bias measures of student learning outcomes as well as indirect measures of tertiary education quality – *i.e.* to provide a proof of concept. To do so, it is thus essential that the countries involved in each pilot be sufficiently diverse.

11. To get a reasonably reliable picture about the feasibility of an international assessment of learning outcomes, the experts who met in 2007 discussed at length the challenges of capturing higher education outcomes in a way which took account of cultural and linguistic differences. They suggested establishing a sample of countries with diverse educational systems, and agreed that the feasibility study should cover several quite different countries and include at least three languages [EDU(2007)14].

12. 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 pilot can be limited. Following expert advice, it is therefore critical to set an upper limit on the number of participating countries involved in each of the strands of work whilst ensuring a geographic, cultural and linguistic balance of countries in each strand of work [see EDU/IMHE/GB(2008)7]. 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 a maximum of 4-5 countries and about 10 HEIs within each country in each strand of work involving the piloting of instruments, and to ensure that they represent a breadth of languages, cultures and geographic backgrounds. This number is large enough to assess the measurement properties of the various instruments but small enough to keep the process manageable.

13. In order to ensure sufficient international variation in each strand of work, one would ideally like to see the diversity of OECD membership reflected in each strand of work. More specifically, the following criteria would need to be taken into consideration, to the extent possible, in the allocation of AHELO participating countries to the different strands of work:

- Geographic origin, with ideally a minimum of one country from the Asia-Pacific region, one from North America and two from Europe in each strand of work;
- Language, with ideally at least one English-speaking country, one Asian language, one Latin language and one other European language; and

- Culture, with ideally a mix of Latin, Nordic, Eastern European, Anglo-Saxon and Asian cultures.

14. Obviously, it may not always be possible to meet all of these criteria altogether, and countries' preferences also need to be taken into account.

The case for some countries to participate in more than one strand.

15. Other than the temporary problem of under-participation in the economics strand of work, there is also a longer term case for some countries to take part in more than one strand – more specifically in the generic skills strand as well as in one of the discipline strands.

16. This issue arose during discussions with experts working on the conceptual framework for the contextual strand. Indeed, even though the different assessments (contextual indicators, generic skills, engineering and economics) are treated as coherent but independent instruments for the feasibility study stage, they would ultimately be integrated as a single instrument with discipline-specific options if AHELO were to survive the feasibility study stage and develop into a fully-fledged assessment in the future. In this respect, the experts recommended that the generic skills and disciplinary assessments be administered to the same student respondents at a reasonable number of institutions in a reasonable number of countries [see Background and major issues of EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2008)11].

17. As a result, it is proposed to allow a few AHELO participants to take part in the generic skills assessment as well as the disciplinary assessment of their choice in order to get insight on complementarities and overlaps between strands, and to identify what information each strand contributes uniquely.

Allocation of latecomers joining the AHELO feasibility study at a later stage

18. In order for current participating countries to be able to start working on the selection of participating HEIs, it is important that the allocation of countries to the various strands resulting from the 17-18 December discussions be final, as participating in the economics, engineering or generic skills assessment has implications for the types of HEIs to approach. It is therefore proposed that countries allocated to a given strand of work at the AHELO GNE meeting remain in this strand in the future – subject to written approval by the IMHE Governing Board.

19. As a result, the preferences of latecomers could only be accommodated subject to space availability in each of the strands of work, *i.e.* one more country could be integrated in the generic and engineering strands, whereas up to three more countries could be integrated in the economics strand of work.