

Unclassified

EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)12/FINAL

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

04-Oct-2011

English - Or. English

DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION  
INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION GOVERNING BOARD

## Group of National Experts on the AHELO Feasibility Study

### PROGRESS REPORT - ABRIDGED

7th meeting of the AHELO GNE

Paris, 1st July 2011

*The AHELO GNE discussed this progress report at its 1st July 2011 meeting and decided to declassify it in the current abridged version.*

Contact: Karine Tremblay, AHELO Senior Survey Analyst  
[Tel: +33 1 45 24 91 82; Email: Karine.Tremblay@oecd.org]

JT03308227

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

1. The purpose of this document is to update participants of the AHELO Group of National Experts (GNE) with progress on the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) feasibility study. This report covers progress since the last meeting of the AHELO GNE which was held on 28-29 March 2011 in Paris. This document takes account of developments up to 16 June 2011.
2. The AHELO GNE is invited to:
  - TAKE NOTE of this progress report; and
  - REPORT on progress as necessary.

### **Project summary**

3. The purpose of the feasibility study is to gauge whether an AHELO is scientifically and practically feasible. It is not to develop a comprehensive or final assessment. Rather, it is proposed 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 into three distinct strands of work to be undertaken separately but coherently.
4. The AHELO feasibility study is undertaking three 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 small-scale 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.
5. In addition to these assessment pilots and the contextual dimension embedded into them, another strand of work is envisaged in the future to 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 would be addressed by researchers, both from a conceptual perspective and through a psychometric analysis of existing datasets. This reflection would provide input for the longer term development of an AHELO, should the feasibility study demonstrate the scientific and practical viability of such an endeavour. Its realisation is however deferred subject to funding becoming available.
6. In accordance with the decisions of the 4<sup>th</sup> GNE meeting, the work will develop in several phases:
  - Phase 1 – January 2010 to June 2011

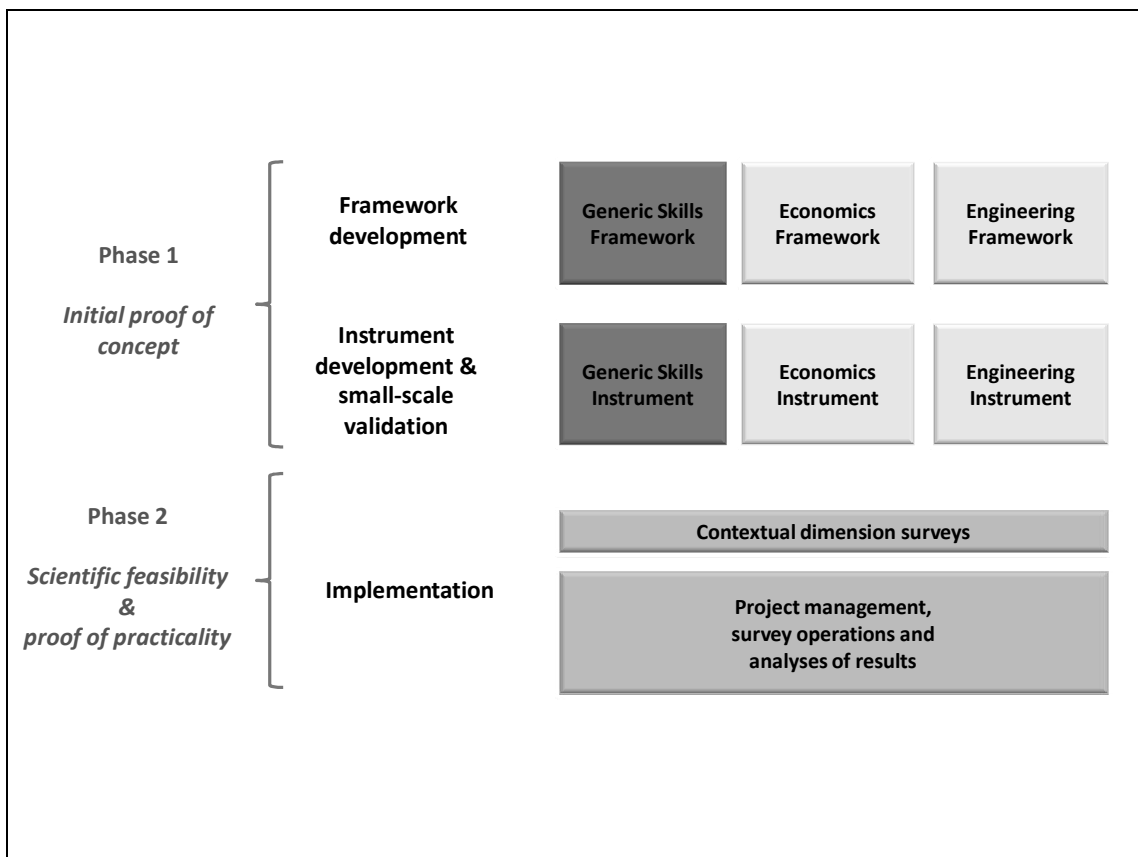
The first phase of the work consists in the development of provisional assessment frameworks and testing instruments suitable for an international context for each strand of work (generic

skills, economics and engineering), and their small-scale validation (cognitive labs and think aloud interviews with small groups of students in a convenience sample) to get a sense of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural validity.

- Phase 2 – March 2011 to December 2012 (subject to funding availability)

In a second phase, the practical aspects of assessing students learning outcomes will be under focus, and the implementation of the three assessment instruments in a small group of diverse higher education institutions will help explore the best ways to implicate, involve and motivate leaders, faculty and students to take part into the testing. 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. A contextual dimension is embedded in the implementation of each of the three assessments to make some preliminary explorations of the relationships between context and learning outcomes, and the factors leading to enhanced outcomes.

Figure 1. AHELO Phases 1 and 2



7. Should these three assessment instruments demonstrate the feasibility of assessing student learning outcomes across different countries and institutions, the last phase will be to develop a value-added measurement strand to explore methodologies and approaches to capture value-added or the

contribution of higher education institutions to students' outcomes, irrespective of students' incoming abilities.

8. By the completion of the feasibility study in late 2012, the information collected on student performance and the analysis of the results will help assess whether a full-fledged AHELO study could feasibly be taken forward from both scientific and practical standpoints. The outcomes of the AHELO feasibility study will guide the decision to be made by the OECD member countries of whether to launch a full-fledged study in the longer term.

## **Status report**

### ***Sixth meeting of the AHELO Group of National Experts***

9. The AHELO GNE met on 28-29 March 2011 to:

- Review progress on the various parts of the AHELO feasibility study work.
- Initiate the reflection on the feasibility study initial findings and longer term plans.

10. Ms. Karine Tremblay (Secretariat) reported on the revisions to the budget and progress with fundraising which had been made in line with the recommendations of the GNE at its October 2010 meeting, and subsequently endorsed by the EDPC [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)2]. She provided GNE members with an update on the feasibility study costs (OECD Secretariat direct costs, OECD indirect costs and contractors' costs), the revenues secured to date and the current budget balance.

11. Mr. Richard Yelland (Secretariat) presented the Secretariat's efforts to increase revenues via fundraising and reported on a meeting held with major U.S. foundations on 18 March 2011 and co-organized with the U.S. Department of Education. The GNE took note of the budget.

12. With respect to the development work for the Generic Skills Strand, Mr. Roger Benjamin (Council for Aid to Education - CAE) reported on work progress with this strand [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)3]. The GNE welcomed the progress achieved in this strand.

13. With regards to the development work for the other strands of work, Ms. Sarah Richardson (Australian Council for Education Research – ACER) reported on progress of the Engineering Strand [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)4] and Mr. Tom Van Essen (Educational Testing Service – ETS) reported on progress of the Economics Strand [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)5]. The GNE welcomed the progress achieved in both strands.

14. With regards to the development work for the contextual dimension, Mr. Hamish Coates (ACER) reported on progress with this work [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)6]. The GNE welcomed the progress of work on the contextual dimension and stressed that the main criterion for inclusion of indicators shall be relevance to the feasibility study.

15. Mr. Hamish Coates (ACER) also reported on the progress of work for the project management, the translation and adaptation process and the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)7]. The GNE took note of the progress of work on project management, translation and adaptation process and the TAG.

16. With regards to the reflection on the feasibility study initial findings, Mr. Hamish Coates (ACER), Mr. Roger Benjamin (CAE) and Mr. Tom Van Essen (ETS) presented initial insights from Phase 1 of the

feasibility study, as well as the Consortium proposal for Phase 2 [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)8]. The GNE took note of the initial insights from Phase 1 and discussed the Consortium's proposal for Phase 2.

17. In light of the budget and fundraising discussion, Ms. Karine Tremblay (Secretariat) presented possible options and business models to move forward with Phase 2 – implementation [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)9]. The GNE agreed to meet again in early July to decide on the feasibility study next steps.

18. With regards to the initial reflection on the longer-term plans, Ms. Karine Tremblay presented options towards the development of AHELO beyond the feasibility study [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)10]. The GNE discussed the options for further development of AHELO and agreed to continue discussion at its next meeting.

19. With regards to expressions of interest from new countries in participation and observation, Ms. Karine Tremblay presented the background for discussion of non-Member participation in the feasibility study and modalities as per IMHE rules [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)11]. The GNE proposed to the IMHE Governing Board the approval of the participation of Colombia and the request for observership from Saudi Arabia.

20. The final summary record of this meeting including detailed decisions made was circulated to the AHELO GNE and Education Counselors on 19 May 2011, and is available on Olis [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE/M(2011)1].

#### ***Stakeholders Consultative Group***

21. The third meeting with the Stakeholders' Consultative Group (SCG) was held in Paris on 31 March 2011 with 17 participants. In addition to an update on the progress of the feasibility study presented by the Secretariat, CAE and the ACER Consortium presented the progress of work in the different strands of work. The summary record of the meeting is available on Olis for further details [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/SCG/M(2011)1].

#### ***Technical Advisory Group***

22. The Technical Advisory Group (TAG) met twice since the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the AHELO GNE, first face to face on 5-7 April 2011 in Paris and then by teleconference on 26-27 May 2011 from various locations. The summary records of their discussions are available as annexes to the progress report of the Consortium [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)13].

#### ***Upcoming meeting of the AHELO Group of National Experts***

23. The 7<sup>th</sup> meeting of the AHELO Group of National Experts is scheduled for 1<sup>st</sup> July 2011 to review progress in reducing the AHELO funding gap since the 6<sup>th</sup> GNE meeting, discuss the options to complete the feasibility study and pursue the reflection on AHELO longer-term plans.

#### ***Country participation***

24. At its 13<sup>th</sup> meeting, the IMHE GB approved the participation of Colombia and the request for observership from Saudi Arabia [EDU/IMHE/GB/M(2011)1] based on the proposition made by the GNE.

25. The IMHE GB also took note of the decision of Sweden to abandon participation in the AHELO feasibility study but to remain involved as an observer. This decision is due to changing national priorities and budget reasons (see Annex 1 for details).

26. Therefore, as of 16 June 2011, 15 countries are listed as participants of the AHELO feasibility study: Australia, Belgium (Fl.), Colombia, Egypt, Finland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Kuwait, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, the Russian Federation, the Slovak Republic and the United States (through the involvement of institutions in Connecticut, Missouri and Pennsylvania) (see Annex 2 for country-specific strands of work).

27. Meanwhile, the Secretariat continues following up with countries, provinces or groups of institutions which have recently expressed possible interest in participation (Canada, Germany).

### ***Progress on substantive work***

28. Progress on the substantive work has continued with the integration of latecomers in the work for the generic skills strand, the completion of the qualitative validation process in the engineering and economics strands of work, the consultation with various stakeholders on the contextual dimension framework, and the planning for the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase of the work. A full progress report by the Consortium is provided separately [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)13].

29. This Consortium progress report also includes in its annexes the summary records from the two meetings of the AHELO feasibility study Technical Advisory Group (TAG) that have taken place since the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the AHELO GNE, and a draft version (as of mid-June 2011) of the AHELO feasibility study report for Phase 1.

### ***Options for Phase 2***

30. In order to get a better sense from each country on the likeliness to leverage the necessary resources to proceed with implementation, the Secretariat conducted a survey asking countries about their interest in participating in Phase 2 and the possibility of providing an additional contribution. A summary report on Phase 2 survey results and options to complete the feasibility study will be presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> GNE meeting [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)15].

### ***Longer term plans***

31. In order to prepare a proposal on AHELO longer term plans beyond the feasibility study for discussion with the Education Policy Committee and IMHE Governing Board at their November 2011 meeting, the Secretariat needs to get a better sense of country preferences on a range of issues relevant to AHELO longer term development. The Secretariat has thus prepared a country survey with specific questions on the various aspects discussed in the options paper discussed at the last meeting of the AHELO GNE [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)10]. The results from the survey will be used to refine a proposal for discussion with the AHELO superior bodies in Autumn 2011, in particular in defining what an AHELO main study might look like for costing and scheduling purposes.

32. A summary report on the country preferences survey results for the AHELO longer-term plans will be presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> GNE meeting [EDU/IMHE/AHELO/GNE(2011)16]. This feedback shall of course be considered as guidance only on country preferences for an eventual AHELO main study as the decision of whether to pursue with a main study as well as its design parameters will eventually depend on the final results from the feasibility study, which are only starting to emerge from the completion of its 1<sup>st</sup> phase.

### ***Communication and dissemination activities***

33. The Secretariat has also invested time and energy to revamp its communication tools in support of fundraising efforts. Emphasis has been placed on the emerging insights from the feasibility study

1<sup>st</sup> phase and the necessity of the 2<sup>nd</sup> phase to address all the questions raised by the feasibility study. To this end, the third AHELO Newsletter was prepared and sent out in May 2011 to subscribers and potential sponsors of the feasibility study. The AHELO website has also been updated and a new version of the Project Update (May 2011) was prepared for the website.

34. With respect to interns, Ms. Eleonore Perez-Duarte left the OECD in mid-April to complete her studies and was replaced in early June by Mr. Rodrigo Castañeda-Valle who joined the AHELO team for a four months internship. Rodrigo is a British and Mexican national who is currently writing a PhD in Cooperation and Communicative Strategies at Lancaster University in England. He will bring his expertise to bear on the adaptation of AHELO communication tools and messages to various audiences and stakeholders.

35. Meanwhile, the OECD Secretariat has pursued dissemination about AHELO through participation in the following events since the 6<sup>th</sup> GNE meeting:

- 1<sup>st</sup> QS-MAPLE (Middle-East and Africa Professional Leaders in Education) conference, 2 May, Dubai; and 5<sup>th</sup> QS ranking workshop, 3 May, Dubai.
- Joint meeting of senior managers of OECD Directorate for Education and European Commission Directorate for Education and Culture, 4 May, Paris.
- Advisory Group for the U-multirank project, 6 May, Brussels.
- UNESCO Global Forum on Rankings and Accountability in Higher Education: Uses and Misuses, 16-17 May, Paris.
- VIRQUAL Webinar on Learning Outcomes, 18 May, from Paris.
- QS World university rankings and Evaluation symposium, École National Supérieur, 18 May, Paris
- Measuring the Value of a Postsecondary Education Conference sponsored by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), 19-20 May, Toronto.
- Conférence des recteurs et des principaux des universités du Québec (CREPUQ), 20 May, Montréal.
- Accession Seminar for Slovenia, OECD/Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology, 25-26 May, Ljubljana, Slovenia
- Old money, new ideas. How Foundations can change Europe - European Foundation Center, 26 May, Lisbon/Cascais.
- European Universities facing Learning Outcomes and Competences - Coimbra Group, 27 May, Padova.
- U-Multirank Final Seminar – European Commission, 9 June, Brussels.
- Transparency tools workshop – Bologna Follow-up Group, 9 June, Brussels.
- Upcoming: EU-STEP Study Tour European Higher Education, 29 June, Valencia.

36. Presentation on AHELO was also made to the following group visiting the OECD:

- Center for Higher Education Transformation, South Africa on 17 March.
- Visit to OECD by University of Tennessee doctoral students on 20 May.
- Briefings for journalists from India and Russia on 23 May.



ANNEX 1 – LETTER FROM THE SWEDISH STATE SECRETARY



REGERINGSKANSLIET

Ministry of Education  
and Research  
Sweden

Peter Honeth  
State Secretary

15 April 2011

U2011/2648/UH

Dr. Barbara Ischinger  
Director  
Directorate for Education  
OECD  
2, rue André-Pascal  
75775 Paris Cedex 16  
France

Dear Barbara Ischinger,

Regarding the Swedish participation in the feasibility study on Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO), I regret to inform you that we have decided that Sweden shall no longer be among the participating countries.

The decision is taken due to national circumstances and for, mainly, two reasons. One is the very heavy national reform agenda in higher education and the work load this implies both for the ministry as well as for the National Agency for Higher Education. The other reason, related to the first, reflects the difficulties regarding further investments in the project on national level.

We strongly support the work of OECD in higher education and we believe that the endeavours of the OECD in looking into possible ways to establish methods and tools for assessing students' knowledge, abilities and skills are important. We also appreciate having been part of the project so far and will, with great interest, follow the continued work as observers.

Sincerely,

Peter Honeth

cc:  
Högskoleverket (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education)

Postal address  
SE-103 33 Stockholm  
SWEDEN

Telephone  
+46 8 405 10 00

E-mail: [registrator@education.ministry.se](mailto:registrator@education.ministry.se)

Visitors' address  
Drottninggatan 15

Fax  
+46 8 21 68 13

## ANNEX 2 – AHELO COUNTRY-SPECIFIC STRAND OF WORK

<b>AHELO Strand of Work</b>	<b>Participating Countries</b>
Generic Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colombia</li> <li>• Egypt</li> <li>• Finland</li> <li>• Korea</li> <li>• Kuwait</li> <li>• Mexico</li> <li>• Norway</li> <li>• Slovak Republic</li> <li>• USA (CT, MO and PA)</li> </ul>
Economics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Belgium (Fl.)</li> <li>• Egypt</li> <li>• Italy</li> <li>• Mexico</li> <li>• Netherlands</li> <li>• Russian Federation</li> <li>• Slovak Republic</li> </ul>
Engineering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Australia</li> <li>• Colombia</li> <li>• Egypt</li> <li>• Japan</li> <li>• Mexico</li> <li>• Slovak Republic</li> </ul>

<b>AHELO Participating Countries</b>	<b>Strands of Work Selected by Counties</b>
1. Australia	Engineering
2. Belgium (Fl.)	Economics
3. Colombia	Generic Skills, Engineering
4. Egypt	Generic Skills, Economics, Engineering
5. Finland	Generic Skills
6. Italy	Economics
7. Japan	Engineering
8. Korea	Generic Skills
9. Kuwait	Generic Skills
10. Mexico	Generic Skills, Economics, Engineering
11. Netherlands	Economics
12. Norway	Generic Skills
13. Russian Federation	Economics
14. Slovak Republic	Generic Skills, Economics, Engineering
15. USA (CT, MO and PA)	Generic Skills

England, Saudi Arabia, Sweden: Observership