OECD Feasibility Study for an Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO)

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Outline

- Background context: key trends in HE
- OECD response: AHELO feasibility study
- AHELO feasibility study at a glance
- 4 strands of work
- Governance and management of AHELO FS
- Where we are: current status
- Next steps
- Looking forward: challenges and opportunities
The context: key trends in HE

- **Growth**
  - Pressure on budgets

- **Diversification of provision**
  - Growth of vocationally-oriented HEIs & private provision in some countries

- **More heterogenious student bodies**
  - More female and mature students, greater socio-economic heterogeneity

- **New governance arrangements**
  - Growing autonomy... coupled with greater accountability requirements, development of QA systems

- **New funding arrangements**
  - Diversification of sources, growing focus on accountability and performance

- **Internationalisation**
  - Bologna Process, curricula, cross-border delivery, student mobility
The context: key trends in HE (2)

- **Change in the demand for skills**
  - Advent of the knowledge economy: from routine/manual tasks to nonroutine, analytic and interactive tasks

- **Impact of international rankings**
  - Emphasis on research, need for alternatives to capture learning outcomes

- **National and regional drivers**
  - **Europe**: Bologna, development of learning outcomes, 'Tuning' project
  - **USA**: (1) Spellings Commission (focus on accreditation, accountability, access, affordability) and (2): Culture of testing and assessment (Collegiate Learning Assessment, National Survey of Student Engagement)
  - **Japan and Korea**: loss of confidence in the quality of HE
  - **China**: demand from consumers and those advising them
  - **UK and USA** especially: demand for relevant customer information

For more on international trends...
Several trends going in same direction

- Greater attention to quality by all stakeholders
  - Students and employers (better-informed choices)
  - HEIs, departments or faculties (comparative strengths and weaknesses)
  - Policymakers (stocks/flows high-level skills, impact of policy decisions)

- International agreement on the need to tackle the quality challenge
  - OECD Education Ministers Meeting, Athens (June 2006): Move from QUANTITY to QUALITY

- But questions on how to do it?
  - 2007: 3 experts’ meetings to explore the scope for an international assessment → desirability / possibility / feasibility
  - Conclusion: Carry out a feasibility study to provide a proof of concept
  - Informal Ministerial Meeting (Tokyo, 2008) → engaged discussions and support for OECD approach provided it takes account of institutional diversity
OECD response: AHELO feasibility study

• **Limited timeframe compared to a fully-fledged study**
  - Limits the scope for developing the perfect instrument...
  - ... but existing tools sufficient to provide a proof of concept

• **Feasibility study vs. pilot study**
  - Provides flexibility in exploring several directions/methodologies
  - Allows some degree of risk-taking (e.g. exploring unexplored areas)
  - Open-mindedness towards outcomes

• **Does not preclude what a fully-fledged study might look like in the future**
AHELO feasibility study at a glance

• **Goal**
  ... to assess whether reliable cross-national comparisons of HE learning outcomes are *scientifically possible* and whether their *implementation is feasible*

• **Why?**
  A research approach to provide a *proof of concept* AND practicality – *Not a pilot!*
  To assist countries decide on further steps on the basis of outcomes

• **When?**
  Timeframe: testing windows from Aug 2010 to April 2011

• **Who?**
  Target population: collect data near, but before, the end of the first (3-4 yrs) degree

• **How?**
  OECD role: to establish broad frameworks that guide international expert committees charged with instrument development in the assessment areas
• From whom to collect data?
  → Comparative data at system level beyond the scope at this stage
  → HEIs as units of analysis & focus on measures at institutional/department level
  → Reporting at institutional (vs student) level

• What to assess? A multidimensional definition of quality
  → Addressing the needs of various users and uses
    “Bottom line” of performance (prospective students and employers)
    “Value-added” to assess the quality of services (HEIs and policymakers)
    Contextual data to make AHELO an effective tool to reveal best practice/problems
  → Both discipline-related competencies ...
    Easily interpretable in the context of departments and faculties but requires highly differentiated instruments
  → ... as well as transversal higher-order competencies / generic skills
    Less dependent on occupational and cultural contexts, applicable across HEIs...
    ... but reflect cumulative learning outcomes and less relevant to the subject-matter competencies that many HEIs, departments or faculties would consider their province
AHELO feasibility study at a glance (3)

- **Some practical considerations**
  - Test of practicality of implementation: international standards for test administration and student participation rates within HEIs
  - Assessments possibly computer-delivered/web-based
  - Performance described through proficiency levels/ can do statements
  - Feedback to HEIs: performance profiles and contextual data, with their own results and those of other HEIs (anonymously)

- **Several choices for the feasibility study**
  Choose from existing instruments respecting their integrity, combine item pools of existing instruments in ways that cover frameworks, or develop new test material

- **Several strands of work carried out in parallel**
  Reflecting several aspects of quality, applying several tools/instruments

- **Number of countries and HEIs deliberately limited**
  For each strand, implementation in 3-6 countries across multiple languages and cultures and about 10 diverse HEIs within each country
AHELO: 4 strands of work

1. **Generic skills strand**
   - In 2007, experts recommended to try out an international pilot test of the US Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to assess the extent to which higher-order skills of the type measured by the CLA can be validly measured across different cultural, linguistic and institutional contexts.

2. **Discipline strand in Engineering**
   - Framework of expected learning outcomes to be defined through 'Tuning' approach.
   - Instruments yet to be determined.

3. **Discipline strand in Economics**
   - Framework of expected learning outcomes to be defined through 'Tuning' approach.
   - Instruments yet to be determined.

4. **Research-based “Value-added” or “Learning gain” measurement strand**
   - Several perspectives to explore the issue of value-added (conceptually, psychometrics), building on recent OECD work at school level.

   - In each assessment, collection of contextual information:
     - to look beyond the sole student performance: (institutional missions, graduates’ satisfaction, employment and socio-economic outcomes etc.)
     - to make AHELO an effective tool to reveal best practices and to identify shared problems.

   - Testing of instruments involved.
# AHELO tests of instruments

## 3 assessment instruments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment generic skills</th>
<th>Assessment discipline-specific skills in engineering</th>
<th>Assessment discipline-specific skills in economics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finland, Korea, Mexico, Norway</td>
<td>Australia, Japan, Sweden</td>
<td>Belgium (Fl.), Italy, Mexico, Netherlands</td>
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## Contextual instrument

Contextual indicators and indirect proxies of quality

## 3 groups of countries

- Finland, Korea, Mexico, Norway
- Australia, Japan, Sweden
- Belgium (Fl.), Italy, Mexico, Netherlands
Governance and management

- **OECD bodies**
  - Education Policy Committee (countries)
  - IMHE Governing Board (countries and HEIs)
  - AHELO Group of National Experts

- **Ad-hoc groups**
  - Range of specialist expert groups providing input to GNE discussions (e.g. Tuning, Contextual Strand, Sampling, Translation etc.)

- **Stakeholders Consultative Group**

- **Overall management of feasibility study**
  - Subsidiary body
    - Members nominated by delegations
    - Coordination at national level
Where we are: current status

• **Institutional Framework in place**
  Broad strategy and roadmap,
  Recruitment of participating countries
  Set up of relevant bodies and groups (AHELO Group of National Experts, Stakeholders Consultative Group, ad-hoc expert groups)

• **Country participation as of 8 December**
  10 countries already formally signed-up for the AHELO feasibility study
  Australia, Belgium (Fl.), Finland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden
  Allocated to various strands of work to ensure diversity: geographically, linguistically and culturally

• **AHELO Group of National Experts**
  1\textsuperscript{st} meeting 17-18 December 2008
  2\textsuperscript{nd} meeting 27-28 April 2009
Communication and dissemination

Web page, distribution list and participation in various meetings and conferences to enhance transparency
Set up of Stakeholders’ Consultative Group
More efforts underway (improvement Web page, podcasts, brochure)

Substantive work

Contextual data (common to 3 assessments)
Development of a conceptual indicator framework grounded in analytical data and information needs as background for subsequent instrument development
1st meeting 24-25 November 2008
2nd meeting 23-24 February 2009

Generic skills strand

Discussions underway with CAE to plan for an international test implementation of CLA

Discipline strands (economics and engineering)

Discussions underway with Tuning experts to develop a framework of desired learning outcomes in Engineering and Economics
Where we are: next steps

- Development of terms of reference for AHELO call for tender
  - Contextual data
  - Engineering strand
  - Economics strand
- Start work on research-based ‘value-added’ strand
- Work on detailed project timeline
- Fundraising
Summary: why this initiative?

• Information feeding peer pressure and public accountability has become more powerful than legislation and regulation...  
  ... makes international comparisons inevitable in a field hitherto primarily of national interest

• The cost of action is significant...  
  Major challenges to be overcome
  ... but so is the cost of inaction
  Judgements about higher education outcomes will continue to be made on the basis of rankings derived from inputs or research-driven outputs

• Not a ranking, nor standardisation, but evidence for policy and practice
Looking forward: opportunities

- **Imagine if...**
  Feasibility study demonstrates that an AHELO is technically possible...
  Buy-in from the sector and stakeholders...
  → Development of a fully-fledged AHELO

- **Quality higher education in 2020...**
  AHELO as one of the QA instruments available to HEIs...
  - HEIs could decide to participate... or not
  - HEIs could decide to use it for internal improvement only... or to make results public

What AHELO could probably do...
  - Benchmarking of HEIs against their peers to identify strengths and weaknesses
  - Assist HEIs’ student recruitment and students’ choices, limit academic drift
  - Researchers could investigate teaching and learning processes at depth... What works and under which contexts/conditions
  - Spur QA reflection: input into QA discussions / not instead of...

What AHELO would not do...
  - Ranking of countries and/or HEIs...
  - Provide a miracle solution to accountability requirements / LO are only one aspect of HEIs’ missions (along equity, regional mission *etc*), no single criterion in HE quality space
Looking forward: challenges

• **Getting the balance right between breadth and depth**
  Not everything that is important needs to be dealt with in detail but the complexity and diversity of higher education needs to be reflected

• **Seek measures that are as comparable as possible...**
  ... but as specific for institutions as necessary

• **Focus coverage as much as feasible...**
  ... but keep it as large as necessary to be useful for policy formation

• **Addressing political challenges...**
  ... on a controversial issue
Thank you

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