

### 3.3 Developments in the OECD

The OECD Education Directorate contends that the available comparative indicators of higher education effectiveness—e.g. type and number of degrees awarded, research outputs produced, or labour-market returns to higher education—are imperfect proxies of student learning outcomes (Nusche, 2008). It notes that institutional rankings (such as the *Shanghai Jiao Tong* and *Times Higher* rankings) are biased towards input factors and research, and are influenced by subjective factors such as institutional reputation. It suggests that indicators of student satisfaction reflect cultural and historical expectations, and may well be inversely correlated with intellectual stretch. It argues that labour market outcomes for graduates—employment and income benefits—are not only sensitive to local economic circumstances (Yelland, 2010) but also reflect the ‘screening’ function of Higher Education as well as its ‘human capital formation’ function.

A focus on learning outcomes (defined in terms of competence acquisition) totally independent of the learning context and the benefits achieved by graduates is regarded as “a promising direction” (Yelland, 2010). Ambitiously, the OECD initiative, Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO), aims to “assess the feasibility of capturing learning outcomes on an international scale by creating measures that would be valid for all cultures and languages” (Yelland, 2010).

Part of the explanation for this approach can be seen in the view of the expert group convened by the OECD in 2007 that generic skills, such as critical thinking, analytic reasoning and problem-solving, can be tested reliably across institutional, occupational and cultural contexts:

*“The kind of competencies to be covered and the methods to be employed could be similar to those used for the Collegiate Learning Assessment Project (CLA). A key advantage is that such competencies are largely invariant across occupational and cultural contexts and could be applied across higher education institutions, departments and faculties. Since such assessments capture, at least to some extent, the cumulative learning outcomes of prior schooling, they should be combined with data on prior learning, for which the CLA provides methods as well” (OECD, 2007).*

However, the expert group noted the limitation of an assessment approach entirely based on generic competencies, and the risk that “what is measured becomes too far removed from what goes on in faculties and departments and does not capture the competencies that are uniquely the province of the institutions” (OECD, 2007).

Hence the group recommended a second strand to assess discipline-related competences, noting that such an approach “would require highly differentiated assessment instruments, which would make comparisons across institutions and countries difficult” (OECD, 2007). The experts suggested that, whatever the disciplines chosen, the aim would be to assess competencies that are fundamental and “above content”, i.e. with the focus on the capacity of students to extrapolate from what they have learned and apply their competencies in novel contexts unfamiliar to them, an approach that is similar to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) which focuses on the scholastic performance of 15 year old school students (OECD, 2007).

Nevertheless, there are contentious assumptions of the Education Directorate’s preferred PISA-like approach transported to Higher Education, as if what is measurable can capture more than the least important dimensions of learning, that competences ‘above content’ are substantive, that value-added can be meaningfully aggregated across different student cohorts, and written tests can be culturally neutral. Hence, the OECD asserts that AHELO is not a pilot exercise but rather a proof of concept and practicality (Yelland, 2010).

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### 3.3.1 AHELO feasibility study

The feasibility study is scheduled for implementation in 2010-11. It will target a population of students who are near the end of their first 3-4 year degree. The assessment will be done at an institutional level and will be based on a written test of competences.

The AHELO feasibility study comprises four strands: (i) generic skills; discipline-specific strands in (ii) engineering and (iii) economics; and (iv) a value-added strand.

The generic skills strand will be tested using a version of the US Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), adapted to the international context. The Council for Aid to Education based in New York City has been awarded a US\$1.2 million contract to develop an international version of the (CLA).

For the assessments of engineering and economics, contextual data will be used to obtain information on the context for learning in the following domains:

- Physical and organisational characteristics: Observable characteristics such as enrolment numbers or the ratio of male students to female students.
- Education-related behaviours and practices: Student-staff interaction, academic challenge, emphasis on applied work.
- Psychosocial and cultural attributes: Career expectations of students, parental support, social expectations of higher education institutions.
- Behavioural and attitudinal outcomes: Students' persistence and completion of degrees; continuation into graduate programs or success in finding a job; student satisfaction, improved self-confidence, and self-reported learning gains claimed by students or their instructors.

The value-added strand is the most complex and least developed at this point. The OECD states that "this strand of work will...reflect on possible methodologies, drawing upon similar work that has already been carried out by the OECD at the secondary education level. Researchers will consider the merits of existing methodologies, and examine psychometric evidence...on the basis of existing data collected at the national level" (Yelland, 2010).

As of March 2010, the following countries had agreed to commit institutions to participate in the following strands of the feasibility study:

- *Generic Skills (CLA)*: Finland, Korea, Kuwait, Mexico, Norway and the United States (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Missouri, and Pennsylvania).
- *Engineering*: Australia, Japan, Sweden.
- *Economics*: Belgium (Flemish Community), Italy, Mexico (to be confirmed), the Netherlands and the Russian Federation.

The OECD is asking each country/state participating in the feasibility study to contribute €150,000. It has also obtained financial support from the Lumina Foundation in the US.

The AHELO project is contentious within the OECD as well as with the wider Higher Education community. The European U-Map project, for instance, questions whether sufficient regard will be given to "the diversity that characterises most higher education systems, in particular with respect to the type of students accepted (admissions selectivity, demographic profile) and the different institutional profiles and missions (such as research versus teaching intensiveness). A lack of data on institutional differences would bias the validity of results" (van Vught, et al., 2010). Standardised testing and the CLA instrument are also the subject of criticism within the US, as indicated below.

### 3.3.2 IMHE: Supporting Quality Teaching in Higher Education

The Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE) program is a unique group within the OECD, as it comprises individual institutions of higher education rather than governmental bodies, and develops a bottom-up agenda rather than a governmentally-driven top-down agenda. However, in recent years the IMHE has been pulled within the OECD Education Directorate as another arm for the pursuit of governmental objectives, notably through AHELO, wherein its members are somewhat compromised.

The Supporting Quality Teaching in Higher Education project is a benchmarking exercise focusing on institution-level and department-level initiatives to improve teaching quality. A primary driver of the initiative is to counter what is seen to be a disproportionate focus on research in published rankings of higher education institutions (OECD, 2010). Phase 1 of the project involved a literature review, and online questionnaire, follow-up interviews, site visits and a dedicated conference. There are 29 volunteering institutions, including: Macquarie University from Australia; the Institute of Education, University of London; and University of Teesside from the UK; and Alverno College, City University of Seattle, and University of Arizona from the US. An overview of institutional policies and initiatives has been published (OECD, 2010).

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