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ASSESSING HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING OUTCOMES SUMMARY OF THE THIRD MEETING OF EXPERTS

Seoul, Korea 26-27 October 2007

This summary of the third meeting of OECD experts is provided for information.

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ASSESSING HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING OUTCOMES

SUMMARY OF THE THIRD MEETING OF EXPERTS

Introduction and summary

1. The main purpose of the meeting on the assessment of higher education outcomes in Seoul, Korea on 26-27 October, was to move forward work on this OECD initiative by discussing the design and implementation of a feasibility study. The issues for the meeting were drawn from the two earlier expert meetings.

2. The structure suggested for a feasibility study by the OECD and the Educational Testing Service (ETS), was broadly endorsed by the experts. On detailed matters of implementation the experts reached agreement on some points while others remain to be resolved and decided on by the OECD. The feasibility study should aim to provide both proof of concept (by testing the scientific approach to assessment) and an indication of practicality (by trying out the assessment in a sample of countries and institutions). For convenience this record recapitulates some information from the earlier meetings.

Communication with stakeholders

3. The experts agree that assessing higher education outcomes is of potential importance to many stakeholders and that the values of such an assessment should be communicated. An assessment would serve individuals to make better informed choices; assist employers seeking to assess the value of qualifications; help higher education institutions seeking to understand their comparative strengths and weaknesses; and inform policy makers seeking to quantify stocks and flows of high level skills and to assess the contribution of institutions.

4. The experts recommended that the work of assessing higher education outcomes should be viewed as a process. That process includes not only the design and implementation of the study, but also communication with stakeholders, to build up an acknowledgement of the assessment and an understanding of its value. The experts therefore advised that the OECD should inform policy makers, institutions and other stakeholders further on the study to provide a deeper knowledge of its purpose, the gains to be made and the practicalities of implementation.

The feasibility study

5. The two purposes of the feasibility study should be:

- to test whether reliable cross-national comparison of higher education outcomes is scientifically possible
- to test whether a valid assessment can be practically implemented within institutions.

6. The experts advised that given the interest and momentum for an assessment of higher education the proposed time schedule for the feasibility study should be kept. The proposed feasibility study was not to be regarded as a pilot study. Fuller field trials would be required in a subsequent stage.

7. It was also agreed by the experts that for in order to test the assessment effectively, the selection of higher education institutions participating in the feasibility study should be diverse and not homogeneous.

8. The experts agreed to the proposal for forming expert committees for the further development of assessment instruments and the design and implementation of the feasibility study. They also suggested the OECD would define the tasks for the committees and set the framework within which they would conduct their work.

The assessment - Cultural and lingual challenges in measuring outcomes

9. The experts discussed at length the challenges of capturing higher education outcomes in a way which took account of cultural and linguistic differences. The experts agreed that the feasibility study should cover several quite different countries and include at least three languages.

10. To find the common elements of skill and knowledge in higher education will be one of the most important objectives of the feasibility study. It was suggested to define the desirable outcomes of higher education (skills and knowledge), in a group with representatives of different cultures, to find the common characteristics and a cross-national consensus. The importance attached to transversal skills such as critical thinking and problem solving might not be the same in all cultures.

Constructing the assessment instrument

11. The experts discussed options for construction of an assessment for a feasibility study: to construct an entirely new instrument for the assessment: to 'internationalise' one of the existing instruments (for example the Collegiate Learning Assessment); or to compose an instrument by selecting items/questions from a pool of existing instruments. None of these approaches had unanimous support: it was considered by the experts that constructing a new instrument would take a long time, that internationalising an existing instrument has its difficulties, and that by mixing existing instruments one might lose the core qualities of the separate instruments.

12. The experts agreed however that it would be possible to have different approaches for the feasibility study and a subsequent main study. While the instrument for the feasibility study needs to answer whether it is possible to measure and compare cross-national outcomes of higher education, it could perhaps be constructed from existing instruments. For a future fully-fledged study there would be time available to construct a new, or partially new, instrument.

Number of countries/languages and institutions in feasibility study

13. The experts agreed that three countries would be the minimum number required for a valid feasibility study to evaluate the comparability of the assessment. Up to six countries could be covered in order to provide additional information. It was also suggested that three to five institutions per country would be enough to conduct the feasibility study. In considering whether to include more countries or institutions in the study, the information gain should be put in relation to the increasing complexity and cost. The criterion should be what was necessary for the successful testing of the concept.

Subjects in feasibility study

14. The experts agreed that (electronic-) engineering, economics and biotechnology were the most interesting subjects for a feasibility study. It was agreed that one subject could be enough for the purpose of a feasibility study and that two subjects could be included if costs and practical concerns would allow it. Three was not necessary. It would be important to choose a subject (or subjects) of interest to institutions, governments and organizations. Pros and cons of the different subjects were put forward but no subject was singled out as more relevant or suitable than the others.

Sampling of students

15. The experts pointed out the importance of a strict regulated sampling of students to achieve comparability. Planning and organizing this was left to the OECD and the committees.

Timing of testing

16. The experts agreed that the best time for the assessment would be towards the end of the student's first (Bachelor) degree (but not during final exams) and at the end of the academic year. If conducted once the programme was concluded there would be difficulty in motivating students to participate. Because of the national differences in academic year, experts agreed that a window of two months of testing in would be precise enough, still giving flexibility to the institutions. Although the timing in the academic year is not the most important aspect of a feasibility study, it makes a fairer comparison if the timing is as equal as possible. Also, it is part of the feasibility study to test the implementation, which also includes the timing of the assessment.

Duration of testing

17. A reasonable time length for the assessment for a student was estimated by the experts to be 1.5 to 3 hours. Two hours was agreed to be the most reasonable duration for individual students.

18. Using a matrix sampling approach would permit total test items exceeding this duration to be administered. No student would take the full assessments. Different sections of the assessment would be given randomly to students. (For example, in a test which is divided into 13 half-hour sections, giving a total testing time of 6.5 hours, each student would take 4 half-hour tests, giving a total of 2 hours per student). In the end, the assessment would be summarized to give the complete results per institution. Further it was suggested that the assessment should be held before or after a class – to make participation as easy as possible for the students, especially those who work part time. Using matrix sampling has implications on how to give results back to the students. This is considered below.

Computer delivered assessment

19. The experts recommended that the assessment should be computer delivered. It was made clear that this would be an irrevocable decision - it would not be possible to change to paper delivered assessment once a computer delivered study commences.

20. For comparability reasons it is essential to be certain that it is the sampled student that takes the assessment, because the assessments results will be associated to background information on the students. To ensure that it is the sampled students who is making the assessment it would be an advantage if the assessment would take place at the institution, for instance in a computer lab.

Motivating institutions to participate

21. In the opinion of the experts the information that the feasibility study would give institutions on how to improve their own teaching and learning processes should be an appealing incentive for them to participate. While some institutions would like to participate to *show* how well they do, some would like to participate to *know* how well they do. For the purpose of the feasibility study it would not be necessary to reveal the results of the individual institutions unless they so agreed. However, for a future fully-fledged study anonymity would be inappropriate. Whichever the OECD decides on for the feasibility study, it would be important to make the conditions clear at the beginning and not have them changed along the way.

Motivating students to participate

22. Motivating students to participate is a key to having a successful feasibility study. There are two aspects to this: first to have them participate in sufficient numbers, and second to insure they make the effort to perform their best in the assessment. The experts suggested that providing information on the study to the students would be essential to motivate them. Motivating the students was estimated by the experts to be harder in the starting up phase. Once the assessment is established, motivating students is likely to be easier. Experience from other assessment shows that it is more powerful and motivating if the institutions themselves contacts the students about the feasibility study by a letter or a phone call, than if for example the OECD were to contact the students.

23. The experts conceived it as important to give individual feedback to the students, to give back the results on their performance in the assessment. Because of the matrix sampling design of the assessment it would not be possible to give the entire assessment score as comparison (since each

student only does a selection of the entire assessment). The experts still deemed it important to give the corrected assessment results to the students. It was discussed whether some kind of scoring interval could be provided to the students to enable a kind of rough comparison to others how performed on the same sections of the assessment, perhaps on institutional or country level. It was suggested by the experts to be sensitive about comparisons in order not to discourage any students.

24. Other aspects of relevance to students' motivation are the length of the assessment and when it is scheduled.

Next steps

25. The experts agreed that the institutions should be the main level for analysis. They discussed whether and how it would be possible to present results by faculty or department. The size of the study and its design will determine what is possible in this aspect.

26. The OECD will continue working to prepare for the feasibility study taking account of the advice given. The experts will be briefed on the progress of the work and might be contacted for future advice via e-mail but it was not expected that this group would meet again in this form. A summary report of the meeting will be prepared and made public.

27. Information material on the initiative would be prepared by the OECD and distributed to the experts for use in communications in their countries. This would probably be in the form of a PowerPoint presentation which should contain examples of assessment items.

28. The OECD is to produce a distinct description of what the feasibility study implicate to higher education institutions and policy makers. This will be distributed before contacting institutions asking their interest in participating in a feasibility study.

29. It was noted that the chair of the meeting, Marshall Smith, would report to the informal meeting of OECD Education ministers in Tokyo in January 2008 on progress.

ANNEX: PARTICIPANTS IN THE THIRD EXPERT MEETING

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