

May 7, 2015

Secretary-General Angel Gurría
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and
Development (OECD)
2, rue André Pascal
75775 Paris Cedex 16
France

Dear Secretary-General Gurría:

The associations representing higher education institutions in the United States and Canada would like to express our strong concerns with the recently issued “Revised Scoping Paper for an AHELO Main Study,” as well as reiterate our grave reservations about using AHELO as a global assessment instrument.

We communicated in 2012 with OECD staff responsible for AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) that the project is attempting to create a transnational “test” of learning outcomes, without clarity of purpose or consultation with institutions. At that time, we expressed deep concerns about the purpose, governance, potential negative impact and high cost of this approach to measuring learning outcomes. These substantial concerns remain.

Higher education institutions in each of our jurisdictions are strongly committed to accountability, transparency and the measurement of learning outcomes. Our universities and colleges recognize that it is important for institutions to articulate and assess learning outcomes, based on evidence.

However, it was the case in 2012, and remains so today, that given the extensive diversity of missions in higher education worldwide, the use of a “one size fits all” outcomes assessment risks inappropriate and inaccurate conclusions. Those concerns have not been alleviated over the past nearly three years. Indeed they have been increased because of the lack of transparency and integrity attached to the current process.

The AHELO approach fundamentally misconstrues the purpose of learning outcomes, which should be to allow institutions to determine and define what they expect students will achieve and to measure whether they have been successful in doing so. AHELO, which attempts to standardize outcomes and use them as a way to evaluate the performance of different institutions, is deeply flawed.

Most troubling during the period in which the OECD has been engaged in AHELO has been the disregard of the criticism regarding the problems and limitations raised by the AHELO feasibility study expressed by a wide cross-section of stakeholders. This was particularly evident at the March 2013 OECD meeting in Paris, “Measuring Learning Outcomes in Higher Education: Lessons Learnt from the AHELO Feasibility Study and Next Steps.”

It also is important to keep in mind that a consensus has never been reached about how or even whether to proceed with AHELO or the value of the project since the feasibility study was first undertaken in January 2010. Indeed, the Board of the Institutional Management of Higher Education program (IMHE) recommended discontinuing the project following the feasibility study.

Since that time, the OECD appears to have abandoned transparency and a broadly consultative process and is moving forward on AHELO based on a meeting in London in February that included only a very small number of countries.

The revival of the AHELO project, and the manner in which it is being done, reveals an unwillingness to openly hear the views of institutional leaders, whose perspectives are most closely informed about the diversity of academic courses and missions. We continue to have significant concerns about how this study is being framed—concerns that are only increasing based on the current proposal to move forward with AHELO.

For example, in the documentation that we understand was reviewed recently by OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation and the Education Policy Committee, the OECD points to a "powerful demand" for data to measure the quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions driven by governments who need that data to determine policy and funding priorities; employers who need data to assess the value of qualifications from different institutions; and students who can use the data to make informed decisions on where to study.

We understand that when the OECD announced the Revised Scoping Paper it acknowledged that following the AHELO Feasibility Study various proposals to launch the AHELO Main Study proved unsuccessful. The proposals, OECD conceded, could not convince a sufficient number of countries, which continued to have difficulties with elements such as the blurred governance arrangements, the focus of the assessment and the value proposition.

In the face of all of these concerns and lack of support, not to mention the exorbitant costs associated with the project, we fail to understand why the OECD seeks to re-launch the project.

We strongly urge you to reconsider the nature and value of the AHELO project and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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