



EDUCATION INTERNATIONAL

PISA for Higher Education

DRAFT

This document has been drafted on the basis of the comments of some EI affiliates in reaction to the OECD paper (EDU/EC/CERI/RD (2006) 3

1. “*PISA for Higher Education*” proposes the development of an international test of learning outcomes in higher education. Such a test would be modeled on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a standardized international test administered to 15-year-olds in schools. The stated objective of developing a similar tool for higher education is to “provide [OECD] Member governments with a powerful instrument to judge the effectiveness and international competitiveness of their higher education institutions, systems and policies....”
2. The document proposes that initial exploratory work be undertaken to examine the methodological feasibility of such a project and to establish a collective decision-making process by which expert advice from countries could be sought. The terms of reference for the exploratory phase were presented to the OECD Education Committee in March 2007.

Key Issues and Challenges

3. The document poses a number of important methodological questions that raise some key challenges faced in developing a PISA for higher education. Clearly, given the variety and diversity of countries and higher education systems to be included in the assessment, it will be exceedingly difficult to determine ‘what’ and ‘who’ to assess, as well as ‘what to compare’. In fact, it is difficult to imagine that any standardized assessment tool could realistically provide any meaningful comparisons across diverse systems, let alone between institutions as proposed in the document.
4. However, the concerns with a PISA for higher education are not just methodological in nature. The problems identified by the OECD are in fact compounded by a number of *political* considerations. For instance, internationally, and even within countries, there is a notable lack of consensus on what should be the appropriate practices and outcomes of higher education. Simply put, there is no widely accepted set of skills, competencies and attributes that are expected – or in fact arguably should be expected – of higher education students. Given this lack of consensus, a standardized

international test of higher education outcomes makes little sense.

5. As with all standardized tests based on an assessment of outcomes, a PISA for higher education will only give at best an incomplete picture of the effectiveness of systems and institutions. Research shows that standardized test results alone are not particularly useful unless information is also provided on the educational context (type of community, socioeconomic status of students, institutional mandate, admissions policy, respect of academic freedom and collegial governance), resources (expenditure per student, student support services, teaching staff, building quality, library resources, support for research), and programs and pedagogical processes (class size, curriculum, instructional methods).
6. As has routinely been the case with PISA, one of the most common problems with the use of standardized tests is the misuse and misinterpretation of results. Problems consistently arise because of the belief that numbers are precise measurements of a student's ability and, by extension, the effectiveness and quality of an education system or institution. Needless to say, no standardized test can or should claim to provide a complete picture of student abilities or institutional quality. The quality of higher education is neither a measurable product nor an outcome subject to any simple performance-based definition. Quality has to do with the conditions and activities of teaching and free enquiry. The quality of higher education institutions is best assessed through rigorous and regular peer reviews. What constitutes quality teaching and research should be debated, established, and reassessed at the institutional level through effective academic senates or councils that have meaningful representation from staff and students. It is primarily the responsibility of higher education institutions to assure the quality of their programs through these collegial processes. The danger is that a PISA for higher education will lead to very simplistic conclusions about the quality of complex and highly differentiated systems, processes and institutions.
7. Developing a standardized test for higher education is particularly difficult given it is at this level where a greater degree of *specialization* takes place both between and within institutions. Whereas all secondary students across all countries are exposed to a set of common subjects assessed in the PISA (i.e. mathematics, literacy and science), this is not the case in higher education. There is considerable variation between and within higher education institutions with respect to what specialized programs students pursue and even what is taught within specific subject areas.
8. As indicated in the OECD document, a further difficulty with a PISA for higher education is related to a fundamental difference between secondary and higher education. Unlike secondary education, attendance at a college or university is not universal but is based on selective standards that vary markedly between countries and even between institutions within countries. Consequently, nations and institutions that have highly competitive and selective admission requirements will likely perform better on a PISA-like test than countries and institutions that are more accessible to the broader

population. For instance, a standardized test may show that public colleges in the United States produce poorer outcomes than elite, private universities. However, this would reflect the fact that elite universities are comparatively far less accessible, serve students that on the whole come from a more privileged socio-economic background, and have highly restrictive admission requirements. Test results would therefore not necessarily reflect the "quality" of education students receive at community colleges or elite institutions, but would rather be more indicative of differences in admission standards and the socio-economic status of students. Similarly, as the OECD document admits, countries with more selective systems would likely perform far better than countries where participation rates are higher and near universal access is promoted.

9. One of the stated objectives of the proposed PISA for higher education is to provide OECD member countries with more information about the effectiveness, quality and international competitiveness of their higher education systems and institutions so that they, as needed, may look at ways of improving quality. Evidence from the standardized test-driven school improvement efforts pursued by many OECD governments over the past two decades, however, demonstrates conclusively that this type of testing does not, in fact, lead to improvements in education. This is often because the test results do not adequately measure deficiencies in educational inputs or processes. In many cases, teachers have simply been encouraged to "teach to the test", a practice which can have a detrimental impact on student learning and educational quality.
10. It is very unlikely that a meaningful assessment of higher education students can be performed in any standardized fashion. Currently, higher education teaching personnel use a variety of methods to assess and measure a student's progress over time. In addition to performance assessments and examinations, these methods include: observing, documenting, analyzing, and commenting on student work; assessing projects and assignments conducted in and out of the classroom; and evaluating research abilities, initiative and originality. Standardized testing can and should never replace the central role that higher education teaching personnel play in assessing students.
11. A further concern is that a PISA for higher education could easily be transformed into a simplistic ranking or league table of institutions. Such rankings are already common and have encouraged many institutions to engage in a senseless competition to improve their standings. In many cases, this has led higher education institutions to inflate their reported statistics in order to move up the rank.

Conclusion

12. The proposed PISA for higher education faces a number of methodological hurdles. More importantly, however, there are important political considerations underlying the project. Standardized assessments of students, either internationally or within nations, cannot be seen on their own as a measure of the effectiveness and quality of higher education. The quality of

the educational experience students receive simply cannot be quantified in a performance-based test. Quality is a function of the “lived experience” of higher education including the conditions and activities of teaching and free enquiry.

13. A more adequate assessment of the quality and effectiveness of higher education would demand that governments and institutions understand teaching as a work of continuous transformation – the life-long education of critical thinkers, the preparation of able and self-sustaining professionals, and the creation of citizens who actively participate in civic institutions and processes. These practices depend on guarantees of academic freedom, collegial governance, the integration of teaching and research, and fair and equitable working conditions and terms of employment for staff. Without a talented and committed academic work force, quality higher education is simply not possible.