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**DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION  
EDUCATION COMMITTEE  
CENTRE FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND INNOVATION (CERI) GOVERNING BOARD**

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**"PISA FOR HIGHER EDUCATION"**

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## “PISA FOR HIGHER EDUCATION”

### Introduction

1. The proposal to directly assess learning outcomes at the tertiary level is part of a response to the request made by Ministers in Athens for advice from the OECD on how better to assess the quality, effectiveness and impact of higher education. A number of ongoing activities, either conducted by the Directorate for Education, or by, or in collaboration with, other Directorates, contribute to a broad assessment of higher education policy and practice. These include the thematic review of tertiary education (EDU/ETP); work on the contribution of higher education to regional needs (EDU/GOV); work on innovation (STI); work on internationalisation and quality (EDU/CERI) and work on the efficiency of education (ECO/EDU). None of these, however, addresses directly the quality of tertiary learning outcomes, which attracted particular attention from Ministers.

2. National and international rankings – focussing on universities and based largely on their inputs or research performance – have attracted widespread media attention, and clearly have an impact on the public perception of the value and purposes of higher education, on institutional mission and priorities, and on policy formulation. There is concern that one effect may be to distort the allocation of resources in higher education to the detriment of teaching and learning. A direct assessment of the learning outcomes of higher education could provide Member governments with a powerful instrument to judge the effectiveness and international competitiveness of their higher education institutions, systems and policies in the light of other countries performance, in ways that better reflect the multiple aims and contributions of tertiary education to society. It would complement and strengthen efforts by other international organisations directed at aligning national qualification systems and frameworks and it would put current rankings of institutions into a broader perspective.

3. Among the international organisations, the OECD is best positioned to provide Member countries with policy-oriented comparative assessment tools. However, before the OECD can offer substantive work proposals for an assessment of learning outcomes at the higher education level, considerable exploratory work needs to be undertaken for which funding is currently sought from the Secretary-General's central priority fund. Such exploratory work will not only relate to aspects of methodological feasibility, but it will also involve the establishment of a collective decision-making process concerning *i)* the subject matter areas which such assessments should involve, *ii)* the question of who should be the subject of such assessments, and *iii)* the question what the most meaningful units of analysis for comparisons would be.

4. Following a first discussion of the Joint Session on this topic, the Secretariat will elaborate terms of reference for the exploratory phase. These terms of reference, together with a proposal for how expert advice from countries would be sought and possible timelines for the exploratory phase, could be presented to the Education Committee at its meeting in March 2007, which would then decide how such work should be further pursued. Also contributing to this discussion will be a meeting IMHE is organising in December on typologies and rankings of higher education institutions which will be addressing some of the concerns about institutional behaviour that are alluded to in this document.

## Key questions for an exploratory phase

### *What to assess?*

5. Any assessment of the quality of learning outcomes needs to clearly define and operationalise criteria for what constitutes quality in learning outcomes. This involves establishing frameworks that describe what competencies would be the subject of a comparative assessment and how these should be assessed. A major challenge, in both scientific and political terms, will be to define the quality of learning outcomes in ways that are relevant and valid across programmes, service providers, systems and cultures.

6. It will be fairly straightforward to assess baseline transversal competencies that are largely invariant across occupational and cultural contexts, which is the approach taken by PISA and PIAAC. However, few would accept this to be adequately capturing what higher education institutions are about. In fact, such a test would probably to a large extent capture the cumulative learning outcomes of prior schooling rather than the value higher education institutions have added to this. This approach may thus need to be complemented by assessing the specialist competencies that tertiary institutions provide.

7. Doing so, would require highly differentiated assessment instruments which, of course, will challenge comparability across institutions and countries. It also risks excluding a large range of competencies that cannot easily be tested with standardised instruments or that are not invariant across cultures, issues which would need to be addressed during the exploratory phase.

### *Whom to assess?*

8. An exploratory phase would also need to address the question of whom to assess. Given the variation in institutional structures, programme lengths and student populations served, both within and across countries, as well as the blurred boundary between academically and vocationally oriented tertiary programmes, it would be difficult to assess learning outcomes near the point where qualifications are obtained, which would be ideal if the aim was to interpret the outcomes in terms of institutional performance. A variation of this would be an assessment after a defined number of years of study, for example near the completion of a first degree. In either case, it needs to be kept in mind that a simple cross-sectional assessment would provide no answer as to the extent to which the competencies assessed were actually acquired in the institutions where the qualifications were obtained.

9. An alternative would be to undertake a cross-sectional assessment of an age group that is large enough to capture typical participants in tertiary education, an approach that could potentially be integrated into the PIAAC assessment, but this would then require an assessment that is relevant during all stages of study, which poses other difficulties.

### *What is going to be compared?*

10. Last but not least, any such assessment needs to determine whether the aim will be to compare institutional performance, the performance of entire systems, or both. Assessing system-level performance will, first of all, need to address the difficulty that differences in institutional structures will detract from establishing cross-nationally comparable samples. Second, in many countries governments have limited options to incentivise the participation of higher education institutions in such an international assessment, not to speak of the individual students involved. An assessment that will essentially remain voluntary would only progressively find acceptance in institutions, and thus participation would, particularly at the beginning, remain patchy. At least initially, it would therefore be very difficult to derive system-level performance indicators from this. Even if it were possible, large differences in enrolment rates would raise questions about how to interpret these since, other things being equal, it could be expected those countries

with more selective systems and lower enrolment rates are likely to perform better than countries where higher education has become largely universal.

11. The other, and perhaps at least initially more feasible option, would be to make this an assessment of institutional performance, in other words, to define and operationalise an OECD standard of quality together with reliable assessment methods to which institutions could voluntarily subscribe. Experience at national level shows that participation in assessments can grow swiftly if the institutions find it useful for their work. Furthermore, even a self-selecting set of institutions – rather than a representative sample or the universe of institutions – can provide useful information for system-level policies about the range of quality in their systems.