

## CONVENING AUTHORITY IN GLOBAL EDUCATION GOVERNANCE

CONVENING AUTHORITY IN GLOBAL EDUCATION:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE OECD'S  
ASSESSMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING OUTCOMES

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### **Lay Abstract**

This dissertation offers original research into a unique and innovative education project at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The key goals of my study involved: a) identifying the organizational, governmental, and private/technical actors involved in the architecture of global education governance; b) exploring the sources and limitations of these various authorities within the scope of a transnational study commissioned by the OECD; and c) challenging the concept of policy “failure” as a way to advance my study’s theoretical and empirical contribution to Political Science.

Beyond contributing to a multi-disciplinary research agenda in global education governance, my study appeals to academic researchers, university administrators, and education policy leaders seeking to understand the broader implications of comparative education assessments, such as AHELO, on higher education policy reforms across linguistically and culturally diverse national contexts.

## **Abstract**

How is authority convened in global education? In 2008, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an “elusive institution” that is nonetheless “routinely heralded as a leading organ of global governance” (Woodward, 2009: xiv), launched a cross-national, cross-cultural feasibility study that would reveal the contours of authority and legitimacy in global education governance. The Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (“AHELO”) feasibility study convened the world’s pre-eminent education experts along with education policy leaders in government and academia to assess whether it was technically and practically feasible to capture the value-added, or “learning gain,” associated with university education.

The emergence of a field of academic study around the “global education policy field” (Lingard et al. 2007) coincides with important questions related to authority and legitimacy in global education governance. The study of global governance itself acknowledges that non-state (e.g., private, technical, epistemic) forms of authority not only help problematize, frame, and propose solutions to pressing public policy decision-making needs; non-state actors constitute key actors in the global governance architectures.

My case study of AHELO offers an important empirical contribution to the nascent global education policy literature while enhancing our theoretical understanding of authority in structures of education governance spanning the OECD member states. Projects such as AHELO - often portrayed as expressions of a relentless force such as

education neoliberalism, globalization, the audit society, or the dominance of wealthy states of the world - are in fact quite tenuous constructions that rely on a challenging integration of legitimacy and stakeholders at transnational, national, and subnational levels.

This dissertation offers compelling and original empirical insight into an innovative, historically-significant and yet politically unfeasible global education project. My dissertation presents global education governance as a “field” in which different actors compete for recognition of authority in the higher education policy space. In some OECD contexts, including the case studies presented in my dissertation, expert authority must compete with academic and university associations, governmental authorities, and even the authority of indicators like global university rankings. My case studies demonstrate how this field is contested in different political economies - shedding light on competition for authority in ways that are particular to variable political settings.

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I have waited so long to finally and formally acknowledge the people who helped me through the arduous, anxious, and yet immensely rewarding process of bringing my dissertation to completion.

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I have a special place in my heart for Manuela Dozzi, who helped me navigate my responsibilities as a graduate student while encouraging/admonishing me to “just get it done!” My sincere thanks to Dr. Katherine Boothe and members of the graduate

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Finally, this dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my mother, Louise Sylvia Catellier, and to the loving memory of my father, Garwood Hillier Smith (1949 - 2016).



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## **List of Abbreviations**

ACE American Council on Education  
ACER Australian Council for Educational Research  
AHELO Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes  
APEC Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation  
AUCC Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada  
CAE Council for Aid to Education  
cApStAn Linguistic Quality Control Agency  
CEAB Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board  
CHEPS Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies  
CLA Collegiate Learning Assessment  
CMEC Council of Ministers of Education, Canada  
COU Council of Ontario Universities  
CPR Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research  
CRT Constructed-Response Task  
DLE Degree Level Expectations  
EDPC Education Policy Committee  
EHEA European Higher Education Area  
EI Education International  
EQF European Qualifications Framework  
ETS Educational Testing Service  
EU European Union  
EUGENE European and Global Engineering and Education academic network  
FCI Faculty Context Instrument  
GDP Gross Domestic Product  
GNE Group of National Experts  
HEI Higher Education Institution  
HECQO Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario  
IAU International Association of Universities  
IBRD International Bank for Reconstruction and Development  
IC Institution Coordinator  
ICC Item Characteristic Curves  
ICI Institution Context Instrument  
IEA International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement  
IEA DPC International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Data Processing and Research Center  
ILSA International Large-Scale Assessment  
IMHE OECD Higher Education Programme (formerly Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education)

IMHE GB IMHE Governing Board  
 LS Lead Scorer  
 MCTU Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (Ontario)  
 MCQ Multiple Choice Question  
 NAQAAE National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Education (Egypt)  
 NC National Centre  
 NIER National Institute for Educational Policy Research (Japan)  
 NPM National Project Manager  
 NSSE National Survey of Student Engagement  
 OCAV Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents  
 OCQSA Ontario College Quality Assurance Service  
 OCUFA Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations  
 OECD Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development  
 ONCAT Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer  
 OUCQA Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance  
 PCIQA Program of Continuous Improvement and Qualifying for Accreditation (Egypt)  
 PIAAC OECD Survey of Adult Skills (formerly Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies)  
 PISA OECD Programme for International Student Assessment  
 PWB Programme of Work and Budget  
 QAA Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education  
 SCG Stakeholders' Consultative Group  
 SCI Student Context Instrument  
 STEM Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics  
 TA Test Administrator  
 TAG Technical Advisory Group  
 TALIS OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey  
 TECA Tertiary Engineering Capability Assessment  
 TRP Technical Review Panel  
 UCTS UMAP Credit Transfer Scheme  
 UIS UNESCO Institute for Statistics  
 UMAP University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific  
 UNDP United Nations Development Program  
 UNESCO United Nations Education Science and Culture Organization  
 WB World Bank

### **Declaration of Academic Achievement**

This dissertation is the culmination of original research that I conducted, in part, at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris, France, between 2012 and 2013. Earlier drafts of my research were presented at the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) in Salamanca, Spain, in April 2014.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCING AHELO

We live in a social universe in which the formation, circulation, and utilization of knowledge presents a fundamental problem. If the accumulation of capital has been an essential feature of our society, the accumulation of knowledge has not been any less so. Now, the exercise, production, and accumulation of this knowledge cannot be dissociated from the mechanisms of power; complex relations exist which must be analysed.

Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: conversations with Duccio Trombadori* (1991: 165)<sup>1</sup>

Now international comparisons make it clear who is failing. There is no place to hide.

Andreas Schleicher, Director, OECD Education and Skills<sup>2</sup>

In 2008, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an “elusive institution” that is nonetheless “routinely heralded as a leading organ of global governance” (Woodward, 2009: xiv), launched a cross-national, cross-cultural feasibility study that would reveal the contours of authority and legitimacy in global education governance.

The Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (“AHELO”) feasibility study convened the world’s pre-eminent education experts along with education policy leaders in government and academia to assess whether it was technically and practically feasible to capture the value-added, or “learning gain,” associated with university education. To accomplish this task, the OECD enrolled 17 countries (higher education

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Peters (2001: 1).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Woodward (2009: 99).

systems) and tested almost 23,000 students across 248 universities in seven different languages and in three different disciplinary strands (economics, engineering, and generic skills); another 4,800 faculty survey responses were recorded to gain additional purchase on the “contextual dimensions” of learning environments (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 161). Establishing a technical proof of concept that would integrate the contextual dimension of learning into a robust cross-national assessment tool was essential to the OECD’s study.

AHELO was arguably one of the most complex studies in higher education ever performed: never before had an intergovernmental organization, even one with such formidable epistemic authority in global education as the OECD, attempted a project to measure learning outcomes across such varied national and institutional jurisdictions. Indeed, there were many factors that pointed to AHELO’s ultimate success and its institutionalization as an OECD main study, or permanent programme.

### **The OECD in the Global Education Governance Architecture**

As an intergovernmental organization (IO) constituted by the world’s leading liberal market democracies, the OECD is at the forefront of social and economic policy research, data collection, and statistical analyses that governments around the world seek to implement as best practices.<sup>3</sup> The OECD’s Education and Skills Directorate (“EDU”) provides member states with expert policy guidance in education and closely related

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<sup>3</sup> When referencing “the OECD” in my dissertation I am referring principally to its organizational apparatus, including its bureaucracy and its programmes; whereas “OECD countries,” “OECD states,” and “OECD members” refers specifically to countries (and jurisdictions, including Ontario and Abu Dhabi) that constitute the OECD’s membership.



thematic areas of global public policy. The “internationalization” of education - discussed at length throughout this dissertation - is one such area in which countries navigate overlapping education, economic and social policy issues with the help of the OECD. The collection of education data and their manipulation into economic or social policies, usually in the form of standard-setting or benchmarking through peer-review processes, is described by some education scholars as the OECD’s “epistemological governance” (Lingard and Sellar, 2014). The “pragmatic” legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) drawn from this epistemological governance identifies the OECD as a leading authority in evidence-based global education governance. Yet this authority is far from established a priori. Pouliot (2021) observes that states rarely accept IO policy recommendations on the strength of their epistemic (or expert) knowledge and/or reputation alone.

The OECD’s ability to synthesize complex data related to the rise in international and “cross-border” education (OECD, 2004) is an essential aspect of its authority in global education governance. Beginning in 2007, the proportion of international students relative to domestic tertiary enrolment markedly increased for Europe, North America and Oceania (mobility rates to study destinations in OECD countries, including Canada, have increased substantially since then).<sup>4</sup> These mobility rates are captured in core OECD publications like *Education at a Glance* (1999-2021), where educational indicators like

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<sup>4</sup> The Australian higher education market has been somewhat of a historical outlier, attracting a significantly higher proportion of international students, principally from the Asia-Pacific region, relative to other OECD countries. Recently this trend has sloped downward as more students from Asia-Pacific choose study destinations in Europe and North America, with Canada recording a significant rise in inbound student mobility rates from 2015-2021 (UIS.Stat).

student mobility help the OECD forecast economic impacts related to academic internationalization. AHELO was explicitly designed to provide government and higher education administrators with institution-level data in order to assess academic performance across tertiary systems (OECD, 2012).

*Figure 1: Inbound student mobility rate (2000-2015)<sup>5</sup>*

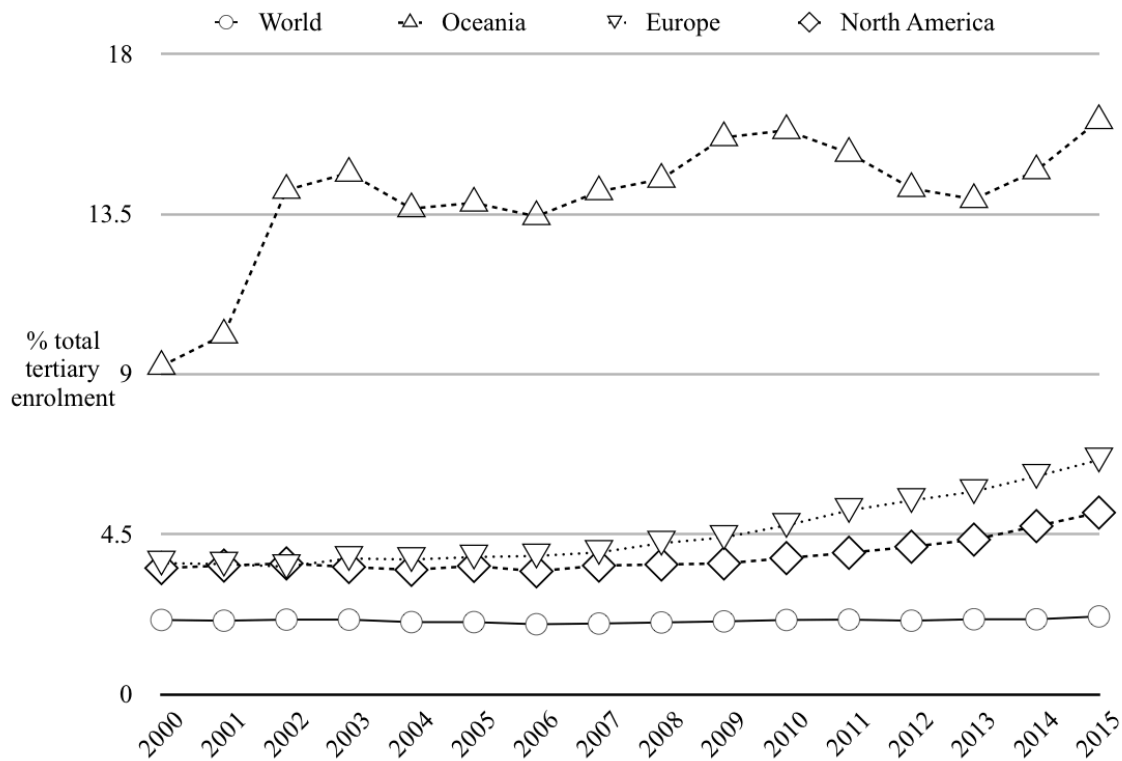


Figure 1 above describes the kind of data the OECD provides its members in order to forecast the growth and flows of higher education into and across member states. The

<sup>5</sup> Inbound mobility rate is defined as the number of students from abroad studying in a given country, expressed as a percentage of total tertiary enrolment in that country. The world average is provided as a baseline. Source: United Nations Institute for Statistics (UIS.Stat)

upward trajectory of inbound students across Europe, North America and Oceania points to a powerful economic logic underlying higher education policies across the OECD.

Plying its expert knowledge in comparative statistics, research methodology and data analysis, the OECD's Education Directorate produces the influential *Reviews of National Policies for Education* for OECD member countries as well as for jurisdictions outside the OECD membership.<sup>6</sup> At the heart of these country reviews are policy guidelines and best practices in higher education management structured around the use of comparative indicators and benchmarks in teaching and learning assessment, guiding national governments through implementation of (novel) quality assurance frameworks. The *Reviews* also reflect the OECD's rather unique mode of governance, which favours policy dialogue, peer review and consensus building in the development and implementation of education policy.<sup>7</sup>

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was developed in 1997 as a way for the OECD to develop standardized testing of secondary students in reading, math, and science. PISA, implemented in over 70 countries across the OECD and beyond into diverse educational, cultural and political systems, is testament to the OECD's legitimacy in global education. The concept of *global* education governance

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<sup>6</sup> The OECD seeks out non-member engagement both as a strategic priority for enlargement and as a way to fund projects not otherwise covered through core budgets. More information about the OECD's Global Relations strategy is found here: <https://www.oecd.org/global-relations/> (accessed on July 3, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> These indicators and benchmarks are diffused as sets of best practices in policy reviews, international conferences, and in the "labyrinth of committees and working groups" (Woodward, 2009: 43) bringing together OECD personnel, national ministerial delegates, and experts/expert groups.

implies that education policies developed at the “global,” or supra-national, level by the OECD effects a form of education policy convergence in countries that subscribe to the OECD’s best practices. Epistemological governance thus recognizes the legitimacy of the OECD to collect national-level education data and “discursively disseminate” (Bieber, 2010) these data as best practices.

### **Conceptualizing “Global” Education Governance**

My research into AHELO makes use of the concepts “global” and “governance” to describe the political environments in which AHELO was developed. Lawrence Finklestein, in one of the earliest conceptualizations of governance, quips that “[ambiguity] affects not only what is meant by *global* but also what is meant by *governance*” (Finkelstein, 1995: 367).

Governance is indeed an elusive concept but Finkelstein draws on James Rosenau’s observation that governance entails the control or steering of human activity in order to modify the behaviour of other actors. “Global governance, thus, is any purposeful activity intended to ‘control’ or influence someone else that either occurs in the arena occupied by nations or, occurring at other levels, projects influence into that arena” (Finkelstein, 1995: 368). A key question for Rosenau was what does governance look like without government? That is, who makes and implements the rules in a polyarchic world (Rosenau et al., 1992: 1) in which state authority is but one constitutive element?

Education policies are “programmes developed by public authorities, informed by values and ideas, directed to education actors and implemented by administrators and education professionals” (Rayou and van Zanten, 2015; quoted in OECD, 2017). How is authority constituted in the process of conceptualizing “global” education policies? Indeed, values and ideas on behalf of whom, and to what end? Education policies “cover a wide range of issues such as those targeting equity, the overall quality of learning outcomes and school and learning environments, or the capacity of the system to prepare students for the future, funding, effective governance or evaluation and assessment mechanisms, among others” (Planes-Satorra and Paunov, 2017: 19). Education policies - which include learning assessments like AHELO - are developed by public authorities in conjunction with education experts; they achieve a wide range of policy, educational, and labour market goals; and they target education actors, e.g., students.

The OECD’s work in global education thus draws attention to the way education policies are ultimately implemented by public authorities *within the state* but guided by experts, administrators and professionals who may operate above and beyond the jurisdictional authority of the state - bringing “global” education policy into governance analysis. The role of private actors - including subject matter experts and education contractors - in shaping education policies has also been widely recognized as a corollary of global governance (Cutler and Porter, 1999), adding an important analytical layer to locating polyarchic and polycentric authority in global education (Ball, 1998; Dale, 2000; Altbach and Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2007; Moutsios, 2010).

More recently, Sending (2015) has interrogated relations of authority in global governance fields. Sending describes fields as “objects of governance;” that is, there is analytical utility in studying sites of governance for clues into how authority is established via the formal/informal mechanisms described by Rosenau. “Global governance,” argues Sending, is thus “an ongoing process of competition for the authority to define what is to be governed, how, and why” (Sending, 2015: 4). The idea that competition for recognition of authority *defines and structures* governance in a given field is especially apt in a study of global education. Sending’s approach, more fully explored in Chapter Three, allows for a theoretically rich approach that accommodates the influence of universities as sub-national authorities.<sup>8</sup> This definition also resists the temptation to assign authority in governance arrangements to particular actors *a priori*.

Michael Zürn (2018) adds yet another important qualifier to the classic definitions offered by Finkelstein and Rosenau. The ways in which international organizations (among other state and non-state actors) establish epistemic authority in global governance has a discernible impact on world politics. Zürn (2018: 9) contends that “interactions between spheres of authority produce the most important systemic features of global governance.” Zürn’s approach makes clear that contestation, resistance and authority among transnational actors is in constant flux; the process by which actors legitimize their epistemic authority across different “spheres of influence” adds a valuable

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<sup>8</sup> My research is centrally concerned with universities but does not address the autonomous nature of university governance. Rather, my dissertation examines how universities have undergone important changes ushered by academic capitalism, internationalization, and participation in global indicator regimes like AHELO.

contribution to our understanding of how technical experts (among other epistemic actors including the OECD) shape world politics. This is especially relevant when discussing governance in terms of “fields” (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018) and the interactive effects of these overlapping fields (e.g., higher education and good governance).

Zürn (2017) observes these concepts of legitimacy may in fact overlap, e.g. the OECD would possess both “cognitive” and “pragmatic” legitimacy for the experts it solicits and the governance networks in place to support policy-making through that expertise. Pouliot (2021), moreover, reminds us that legitimization claims may appeal to different sets of actors even when policy areas converge, thus creating the potential for contestation and resistance over legitimacy (in addition to contests over authority) in a given field.

AHELO appealed to moral, pragmatic and cognitive sources of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995); each of these concepts of legitimacy exist and are in tension with one another, which leads to fragmented epistemic authority and exceptional difficulty in articulating a “politically feasible” transnational project - leading to the observation by Tallberg et al. (2018: 9) that “legitimacy in a sociological sense may vary over time, across audiences, between institutions, and...is open to alternative measurements as well, such as observed behaviours of endorsement or resistance.”

The important point here is that expert/epistemic communities are far from homogenous or free of conflict and contestation; they enter the realm of “relational authority” described by Sending (2015) in which legitimacy - and therefore the ability to

influence - is a constant struggle between supra- and sub-ordinate actors. This compound definition of governance (polyarchy + relational authority) underpins my analysis of AHELO discussed at length throughout the remainder of this dissertation.

### **Why AHELO?**

Why was AHELO developed by the OECD, and how was it different from other learning outcome measurements in circulation? As this dissertation explores in subsequent chapters, AHELO was conceived as a “PISA for higher education” (OECD, 2013a: 58) that would reflect institutional quality, (re)position universities to be globally competitive, and constitute a more holistic quality assurance environment guiding education policy makers.

The disciplinary strands studied in AHELO - including engineering, economics, and generic skills - were chosen for their generalized comparability and functional attributes. What skills will (future) employers need? How will workers communicate across cultures and languages to solve technical problems? Attention was keenly paid to employer stakeholders in the AHELO study. AHELO’s problem-based, multiple choice, and open-ended questions required students to “think like an engineer” (OECD, 2013b: 80). AHELO was structured around disciplines, indicators and variables theorized to play a foundational role in a university student’s progression from higher education to the world of work.



Yet most universities already include learning outcome assessments specific to a course, program, or discipline in order to ensure students are processing academic content. Often these assessments are conducted as part of standardized testing, or researched through specialized university offices that integrate learning outcome data with contextual information to produce systematic guidelines for institutional quality. Some disciplines, especially engineering, align learning outcomes with professional accreditation standards. As one university differs from another, learning outcomes should therefore be tailored to the particular institutional settings and not generalized amid such variability.<sup>9</sup>

A comparative platform, on the other hand, would refocus the intent of assessment by emphasizing *relative* performance between HEIs. In theory, AHELO data would empower governance decisions but invariably challenge university governance authorities, revealing weakness in administration and leadership as much as in teaching and learning. Because learning outcome indicators would theoretically permit policy makers to allocate financial resources to HEIs on the basis of this data, an AHELO-type instrument would potentially exacerbate inequalities between institutions. Accordingly, one needs to remain attentive to the politics of education reform and the deep contestation around questions the OECD was adamantly pursuing.

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<sup>9</sup> This was one of several problem with AHELO raised by Universities Canada to the OECD in May 2015 and discussed at length in my concluding chapter (Chapter Six: Concluding AHELO). The letter can viewed here: [https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server\\_files/files/ACE-UC%20AHELO%20Letter.pdf](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/ACE-UC%20AHELO%20Letter.pdf) (accessed on March 7, 2022)

Yet the architects of AHELO noted several benefits to the standardization of cross-national learning outcomes, many of which hinge on assumptions undergirding a set of competencies and aptitudes suited to knowledge workers, knowledge societies and a globalized economy. According to the AHELO brochure, “high quality tertiary education is essential” to the global labour market, and “students need to obtain the right skills to ensure economic, scientific and social progress.”<sup>10</sup>

Although learning outcomes are typically conceptualized and developed in individual higher education institutions, the OECD emphasizes that a paradigm shift in education has made *comparative* learning outcomes across and between systems more important in recent years:

Learning outcomes are indeed key to a meaningful education, and focusing on learning outcomes is essential to inform diagnosis and improve teaching processes and student learning. While there is a long tradition of learning outcomes’ assessment within institutions’ courses and programmes, emphasis on learning outcomes has become more important in recent years. Interest in developing comparative measures of learning outcomes has increased in response to a range of higher education trends, challenges and paradigm shifts (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 9).

Indeed, there are compelling reasons for universities to adopt (and adapt) to AHELO. First, administrators and faculty are *genuinely* interested in the learning outcomes of their students: Participant-observer data and qualitative interviews with

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<sup>10</sup> OECD (2010). AHELO: Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes. Accessed online at <http://www.oecd.org/edu/highereducationandadultlearning/45755875.pdf>

university faculty at the IMHE conference in 2012 spoke of the desire to sincerely improve institutional quality. A “culture of assessment” incorporating tools like AHELO would, in some national contexts (e.g, Mexico), shore up confidence in public education systems; such quality assurance environments would counterbalance a poorly regulated, non-accredited and privatized HEI system that seemed *ad hoc* and reactive to sudden and overwhelming demand for tertiary education (field notes, OECD/IMHE: 19 September 2012).

Second, AHELO’s evidence-based approach to learning quality/learning gain would challenge the global rankings regime, widely regarded as biased in favour of elite research universities in Europe and North America. AHELO would provide a more transparent “value-added” measurement of institutional and teaching quality, thereby levelling the playing field for less prestigious schools. AHELO would challenge the authority of influential global rankings regimes, contributing to the “field development” (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018) of education governance.

Third, comparative learning outcome indicators would help universities develop effective internationalization strategies. One salient feature of globalization is the impact of student mobility on university demographics and missions. International students - many of whom do not speak English as a first language - undoubtedly impact how “above content” knowledge is conceptualized and taught in universities. Indicators are thus “embedded in a larger world view” (Dahler-Larsen, 2014: 977) in which universities attempt to make sense of relevant course content for a diverse student population.

Conversely, then, global trends suggest that learning outcomes *should* be indexed cross-nationally and across languages in order to serve the internationalization of universities. Robust learning indicators signal a university's commitment to producing knowledge capital, thereby attracting knowledge "investors" in the form of international students and joint research collaboration, among other investment targets mandated by the "global" university.

AHELO was thus situated programmatically in OECD education among a constellation of international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) in education, joining a "family of assessments" (OECD, 2013b: 9) seeking to identify and measure the value-added of institutional learning.

*Table 1: The OECD's "family of assessments"*

Programme name and date of launch	Level of assessment	Scope of assessment	Purpose of assessment
International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (1994-1998)	16-65 year old working age population	22 countries	The OECD's first cross-national study to measure and compare literacy skills
International Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) (2002-2006)	16-65 year old working age population	12 countries	Building from IALS. Included wider range of skills and problem solving
Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (1997-)	Secondary	70+ countries	Testing reading, math, and science knowledge of 15-year olds to meet "real life challenges"

Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) (2008-2013)	University students; faculty; administration	17 higher education systems	To measure what students know upon completing a 3- or 4-year undergraduate degree
Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)	Adults in the workplace	24 countries	To assess critical thinking and problem solving of adults in the world of work.
TALIS - Teaching and Learning International Survey (2008-)	Teachers and school principals from primary to secondary (K-12)	24 countries (2008); 38 countries (2013); 48 countries (2018)	To gather data on working conditions and learning environments for policy change/reform
Labour Market Relevance and Outcomes of Higher Education (LMRO) (2020-)	Higher education institutions	3 countries in first project (2018-2019); 4 in most recent project (2020-)	Aligning higher education provision with labour market needs; research into role of “big data” in employers’ needs and “alternative credentials”

(Source: adapted from Addey, 2014)

Table 1 presents an historical overview of the OECD’s “family of assessments.” The AHELO study builds on, but also departs, from this family of assessments. Where a study like PISA measures reading, math and science skills in 15-year old secondary school students, AHELO attempts to capture learning gain for typical third-year university students before they reach the world of work.

### **Research problem, research questions, and guiding hypothesis**

The OECD commanded the necessary resources, networks and legitimacy required to unveil an innovative cross-national study in higher education learning outcomes. The AHELO feasibility study would consolidate the OECD's epistemic authority in global education while providing universities and governments with evidence-based management tools to augment university performance and accountability: "The motivation is that this information could contribute to higher education institutions' knowledge of their own teaching performance, *and thereby* provide a tool for development and improvement." (OECD, 2008; emphasis added). The historical "moment" seemed ripe as internationalization had a real impact on university budgets and national economic growth across many OECD countries.

Suddenly, and without much fanfare, the OECD terminated AHELO in July 2015 despite having achieved a proof of concept that validated the technical aspects of the study. A study that had been described as the "holy grail" (OECD/EDU: 2007(8): 1) of assessment instruments by governments, OECD staff, international media, and in research interviews ultimately failed to proceed to a main study.

AHELO's development and ultimate "failure" as an OECD main study leads to a central research problem: Despite the *scientific feasibility* of the AHELO study - the declaration by technical experts in March 2013 that measuring learning outcomes across different national, linguistic, and cultural contexts was technically achievable (OECD/

AHELO, 2012) - the OECD's latest comparative assessment instrument was, in the final analysis, *politically unfeasible*.

This research puzzle leads to a principal research question at the heart of my dissertation: ***how is authority constituted in global education governance?*** This question points to the fractured and contested nature of authority in higher education and to the hypothesis framing my theoretical enquiry. AHELO certainly suggests that the OECD drives education policy on a global scale; yet this authority also depends on a constellation of actors operating across a global policy field populated by national governments, quality assurance agencies, university administrators, subject matter experts in education, and faculty and students (the “education actors”).

The hypothesis guiding my research is that global higher education governance is more than simply an expression of state interest, a corollary of globalization, and an effect of the neoliberal audit society. ***The global governance of higher education involves tenuous constructions that integrate legitimacy and stakeholders across transnational, national, and subnational levels. These constructions are characterized by a competition for the recognition of authority relying on technical (scientific) feasibility as much as claims to moral and epistemic legitimacy.*** Theorizing the role of AHELO in the broader global governance environment thus brings into analytical focus the supra- and sub-national actors that constitute this field and come to define how authority is shaped in global education governance.

Emanating from this research puzzle are five specific research questions that refine my research design:

1. Who claims authority over comparative indicators in global education governance?
2. What discursive, technical and political resources are deployed in convening novel forms and patterns of authority across these scales?
3. Where is authority in global education enabled and resisted?
4. Why is “competition for authority” important for the study of global governance?
5. Did AHELO ultimately *fail* as a piece of global public policy?

My research into AHELO thus helps us understand how authority is convened in global education governance. Moreover, my conclusions point to an “AHELO effect” on global governance: The interplay of education indicators with other governance indicators at the supranational level; the rise of transnational education networks through which quality assurance agencies increasingly shape evidence-based approaches to national higher education policy planning; and the role of universities in mobilizing legitimacy and authority for global education projects at the subnational level. This “AHELO effect” in global governance questions whether AHELO, in fact, can be regarded or described as a policy failure.

**Research methodology: an exploratory case study of AHELO**



Ontario (the jurisdiction representing Canada), Mexico and Egypt were among 17 country-participants in AHELO. This within-unit case comparison is theoretically interesting because the value of AHELO is premised on its institutional adaptability across cultures and languages. Indeed, a key feature of “policy as numbers” in global governance is the ability for indicators, indices, and benchmarking tools to provide “value-neutral” measurements, orienting policy makers around a common language with which to compare and assess best practices.

And yet institutional variation matters very much in the implementation of a complex transnational study like AHELO. Indeed, how do cultural variations in higher education quality assurance, disciplinary accreditation, and university governance and politics impact the ability of the OECD to convene authority for AHELO?

This case comparison points to an important limitation in my study: how can cross-unit research into AHELO’s implementation across three vastly different higher education systems produce generalizable results into theorizing global education governance? While distinguished by the absence of preliminary propositions and hypotheses, exploratory case studies nevertheless provide a rich description of novel ideas, actors, processes, and structures in the empirical world (Gerring, 2004: 341).

In studying AHELO, it made sense to follow an exploratory model of research used extensively in qualitative social science (Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997; Collier 1999; Ragin 2000) “according to which theory and evidence are closely intertwined. Hypotheses may be suggested by prior theories, intuitions, or the evidence itself, and

should be adjusted to reflect the evidence-at-hand. Moreover, the evidence itself (i.e., the scope of the research) may be redefined as the project evolves” (Gerring 2001, 231). This strategy of allowing research findings to help inform theory was especially important when considering the “relational” aspect of authority in global governance (Sending, 2015). From this theoretical perspective, authority is never determined *a priori* to its establishment through sub- and super-ordinate relations between actors in the education field. Indeed, it is insufficient to claim the OECD’s super-ordinate authority in a novel study despite its pre-eminence in global education policy more generally. A theory of authority and legitimacy is thus proposed as relations of authority are observed through the study’s conceptualization, technical development and national implementation.

The purpose of my research strategy was thus to illustrate, rather than to “prove,” how a transnational education study convened authority across multiple governance scales. My selection of cases in the AHELO study was intended to bring into relief the construction of governing authority and, thereby, to strengthen inferences about the causal mechanisms at play in global governance more generally.

First, AHELO was both unique and historically significant. Despite being situated within the OECD’s “family” of comparative assessments, AHELO was the first study that attempted to identify and (eventually) measure the “value-added” of university learning in a cross-cultural and -linguistic context. In this way, AHELO offers exclusive insight into how the OECD managed an innovative project at the tertiary level in conjunction with

technical experts, national governments, academic communities, and a host of stakeholders (described in detail in Chapter Two).

Second, researching AHELO brings into critical perspective the growing use of numerical indicators, statistics, indices and other benchmarking tools in higher education management. AHELO thus offers empirical evidence of the growth of “policy as numbers” across the global education landscape - a phenomenon traced in the academic literature but mostly limited to studies of PISA. As a unique study AHELO nevertheless points to a more generalizable trend in global education in which comparative indicators form the basis of education policy.

My case selection strategy aimed to capture the varied education political economies in Ontario (Canada), Mexico and Egypt as a way to probe the causal relationship between (emerging) quality assurance regimes and novel benchmarking tools in higher education. Additional comparative research into national-level cases would seek to explore the “institutional readiness” of certain higher education political economies - both within and beyond the OECD membership - in their adoption of comparative tools like AHELO. Such a comparative study would further explore the international dimensions of public policy by weighing the degree to which domestic education policy choices are informed by global ideas, policies, and regimes (e.g., the global university rankings regime).

What, then, is AHELO a case of? Erkkilä and Piironen (2018: v) observe that indicators across different policy domains constitute “an evolving field of global

measurement that surpasses them.” Governance fields may be adjacent, overlapping, and mutually constitutive. For example, the governing authority of university rankings may point to national economic policies conducive to competitiveness and innovation (ibid.: vi), thereby validating those rankings beyond the education governance field alone. My study into how AHELO was developed and implemented in three varied jurisdictions is a starting point to interrogate domestic as well as international variables that contribute to a global education governance architecture.

Finally, my exploratory case selection strategy provides a more complete picture of policy failure in global governance. As McConnell (2015) observes, policy outcomes may be located on a spectrum where “outright” failure is but one outcome. Rather, as Erkkilä and Piironen show, it may be more useful to consider how comparative indicators (and their attendant technologies and discourses) reinforce and buttress adjacent governance fields, in a sense becoming repurposed in the production of other indicators (like economic competitiveness). AHELO’s network, and the innovations it offered the global knowledge governance architecture, deserves to be studied as an example of policy “failure” that nevertheless continues to shape the global education policy field and, by extension, adjoining and interrelated fields so central to this governance architecture.

### **Sources of data**

The empirical research in my dissertation draws on three sources of data: content analysis of key OECD publications (textual data), qualitative/elite interviews (verbal

data), and participant-observation notes from two major OECD conferences related to AHELO (ethnographic data). My study's careful use of human participants (e.g., through participant-observer fieldwork and qualitative interviews) was approved by McMaster University's Research Ethics Board (project number 2012 199). The email recruitment script is attached as Appendix B to this dissertation and sample interview questions are itemized in Appendix C.

### *Textual sources*

A principal source of data informing my analysis included primary documents authored by the OECD Secretariat and preserved as part of the AHELO archival record. Primary documents included declassified briefings, summaries and notes from three Expert Meetings (2007); informal ministerial workshops held at OECD headquarters; and IMHE Governing Board meeting minutes. This corpus of primary source material captures the technical, political and managerial aspects of developing the feasibility study from initial conceptualization in 2006-2007 through to the technical development stages as the study proceeded to implementation in 2012. These AHELO briefings undergird the content validity of empirical findings in my study because they provide unique insight into the convening of bureaucratic and technical authority in the AHELO project.

The Experts Meetings convened from April to October 2007, for example, are representative of the diverse technical and political interests informing the development of the feasibility study. Those in attendance at these crucial meetings at AHELO's early

technical development stage included senior directors and analysts from the OECD Secretariat, ministerial delegates to the Education Policy Committee, and international experts in education testing and assessment. From these meetings we see how the initial tendering process by which experts selected early in the study produced some of the conflict that arose in later stages as a revised Terms of Reference was introduced to accommodate the AHELO Consortium (see chapter one for a list of Consortium partners, and chapter three for a more detailed account of this competition for authority).

Further, meetings convened by the IMHE Governing Board outlined some of the main methodological, technical and organizational challenges facing the study, especially as the study coincided with the global financial crisis in 2008 and additional, unexpected budgetary shortfalls that compelled the OECD to expand institutional participation from 15 to 17 countries. These declassified documents provided a glimpse into the convening of bureaucratic authority within the OECD for conceptualizing the scope and purpose of AHELO while also providing an account of the periodic crises that befell the study.

The analytic scope of my research went beyond these declassified meeting summaries and technical briefings to include key OECD publications. Foremost among these important secondary source materials included the three principal AHELO Feasibility Study Reports (Volumes 1-3) authored by OECD program managers and analysts. The volumes represented the OECD's own bureaucratic perspectives on the AHELO study. These volumes also incorporated "country experience" data, including student and faculty participation rates for each disciplinary strand of testing.

In broadening the scope of textual analysis I also referred to flagship OECD publications, including those published by the Education and Skills Directorate and the Economics Directorate. Within these publications we see the discursive links between education and economic performance - identified as human capital theory in my review of academic literature in chapter two.

In these important publications the OECD attempts to draw causality between evidence-based higher education management tools, including AHELO, and emerging themes related to the economic performance in the global knowledge economy. Thus, *Education at a Glance* (1997-2021) provides annual data on comparative educational indicators in countries throughout the world; *The Future of the Global Economy: Towards a Long Boom?* (1999) outlines the implications for failing to invest in knowledge societies; *Internationalisation and Trade in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges* (2004) reviews the trends in international student mobility leading to AHELO's conceptualization in 2006; *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society* (2008) provides guidance on quality assurance policies guiding institutional reform; and *Better Skills, Better Jobs, Better Lives: A Strategic Approach to Skills Policies* (2012; referred to as *Skills Strategy*) integrates learning outcome data with broader social and economic policies embraced by the OECD.

### ***Qualitative (elite) interviews***

The qualitative interview has long been regarded as an essential aspect of content analysis (Merton and Kendall (1946: 541), helping to bridge information gaps in textual

sources. Empirical data in my study was further bolstered by fifteen qualitative interviews conducted between March 11-13, 2013 with OECD directors, senior (and retired) OECD bureaucrats, OECD policy analysts familiar with AHELO, institutional (university) representatives and government delegates participating in the feasibility study.

Interview respondents were selected on the basis of purposeful sampling due to their familiarity with and participation in AHELO. This non-probabilistic method was deemed appropriate because of the small population of potential respondents in such a study. Initial fieldwork<sup>11</sup> as a participant-observer at an OECD higher education conference in September 2012 afforded the opportunity to approach potential respondents and solicit interest for a follow up interview. Between September 2012 February 2013, emails outlining the description of my project were sent to respondents first approached at the IMHE conference in 2012. This communication included details on confidentiality, attribution and consent (see Appendices A-C).

The initial sampling method proved to be a useful strategy for securing additional interview respondents at the subsequent OECD conference in March 2013. This “snowball” sampling approach helped to ensure my interview data was both representative of different institutional voices and highly informed by those participants close to the inner workings of AHELO. While a non-probabilistic approach presents

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<sup>11</sup> I was invited as an academic observer to attend the OECD’s conference entitled, *Attaining and Sustaining Mass Higher Education*, from 17-19 September, 2012. This conference was convened by the Institution for the Management of Higher Education (IMHE).



external validity issues to a research design, the objective of the exploratory study strategy was to provide a rich descriptive account of the feasibility study.

The qualitative interviews, conducted in English with occasional need for Spanish translation, initially pursued an open-ended, semi-structured approach favoured by Hammer and Wildavsky (1989). Aberbach and Rockman (2002: 674) suggest this method permits respondents “to organize answers within their own frameworks,” contributing to the validity of responses. The ‘right’ combination of open- and closed-ended questions demonstrated an appropriate level of background information that prompted respondents to unearth valuable, rich data.

Although open-ended interview questions offer considerable latitude they afford respondents the opportunity to reveal what is, to them, important information (Leech, 2002). This approach provided crucial insight into the different narratives underpinning participation in AHELO. Some National Project Managers (NPMs) approached the study as a way to integrate innovative assessment methods into their own (nascent) national quality assurance frameworks. Stories revealed through interviews emphasized a sense of global belonging (Egypt) echoing a logic of appropriateness to the OECD’s epistemic authority (Mexico).

These interviews further revealed a cognitive dissonance between different respondents in the AHELO study that textual sources failed to describe with any nuance. While some university representatives on AHELO’s institutional governance body - the IMHE - pursued more fundamental questions related to AHELO’s educational goals and

social purposes, other respondents - in particular those with finance and administrative backgrounds - tended to approach AHELO rather more instrumentally. Interviews thus brought into relief the different, and sometimes opposing, values within the OECD environment that may have been otherwise effaced by the perception, a priori, of cognitive, moral, or pragmatic legitimacy afforded such an epistemic authority in the academic literature (e.g., McBride and Mahon, 2008; Porter and Webb, 2008).

### ***Participant-observation***

Attendance at the IMHE General Conference in 2012 placed into context the rapidly shifting policy environment in which higher education institutions from around the world were trying to navigate. Questions about education quality, access, affordability, post-graduate employability within an increasingly tech- and knowledge-driven global economy were all foregrounded at this conference. National representatives from education ministries presented alongside university administrators, students, and representatives from the business and non-profit sectors. As this conference took place during the project implementation phase of AHELO, questions of access, quality and *equality* were paired with methodological questions about how to optimally capture data for improved educational quality. That is, there was a felt need by attendees at this 2012 conference to enunciate questions of institutional reform alongside emancipatory, representative and redistribution goals echoed in much of the education/social policy literature (Fraser, 1995; Rhoades and Szelenyi, 2011).

Figure 2: Conceptual Mural, OECD/IMHE, September 2012



The mural depicted above represents a visual history of the ideas recorded during the two-day conference in Paris.<sup>12</sup> Many of the keywords appearing in large and colourful fonts - quality, sustainability, diversification, accessibility, transformation, [higher education] in the Arab region - spoke to some of *qualitative* issues overlapping *quantitative* approaches to developing more robust quality assurance and data management tools.

The methodological approaches selected for my research design bring into relief the actors, institutions and discourses that characterize what my dissertation identifies as a global higher education policy field.

## Outline of the Dissertation

<sup>12</sup> The mural (and a photo of me attending the conference) can be found in this presentation by the OECD: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/oecd-education/sets/72157631641636581/>

Following this introductory first chapter, Chapter Two presents a “Wikipedia” entry for AHELO describing in technical language the various components of the feasibility study, including its governance structure, principal actors and institutions, and sample questions from each of the three testing strands. As such, Chapter Two provides a roadmap of key concepts that orients the reader through the empirical observations in subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter Three situates some of the main theoretical approaches explaining global education governance. While not exhaustive, the survey of literature theorizes how authority in global education is convened through a) bureaucratic and organizational discourses; b) through a theory of human capital that focuses critical attention on the “neoliberalization” of higher education; and c) through theories and approaches in political science that bring transnational networks and governance architectures to bear on analyses of “global” education.

This literature largely falls short in explaining how authority in global education is convened, contested and sustained in large-scale international assessments of which AHELO is an example. Moreover, extant scholarship tends to overlook universities as sites of political analysis in global governance despite their importance as objects of higher education governance.

Chapter Four is the first of two empirical chapters drawing on content analysis, interview research and participant observer data from September 2012 to March 2013. (Research ethics approval for my empirical work was obtained prior to initiating

fieldwork in 2012.) This chapter describes AHELO's conceptual and technical development in 2006-07 leading to phase one of the study's launch in 2008. In addition to providing a timeline of key moments in AHELO's policy life cycle, this chapter describes the sources of technical and managerial authority overlaying the OECD's epistemological governance in global education. Moreover, the chapter also begins to address important points of tension in the competition for authority emerging between epistemic actors within the global education policy field.

Chapter Five brings my analysis of global education governance into national and institutional context by focusing on AHELO's implementation in Ontario (Canada), Mexico and Egypt. This chapter provides important background into political economies of higher education by focusing on the quality assurance regimes undergirding transnational networks through which comparative assessments like AHELO play an important role. This chapter further posits a novel role for universities in global education governance while highlighting the points of tension and resistance in the higher education governance field.

Chapter Six offers concluding thoughts about the "AHELO effect" in global governance. Even though AHELO failed to institutionalize as an OECD main study, its proof of technical concept and successful implementation across different national, linguistic and cultural contexts problematize how the policy literature conceives of failure. The concluding chapter attempts to reconcile the OECD's policy failure, suggesting that failure, ambiguity and tension are inherent and constitutive of

neoliberalism's ongoing project in global higher education. This is not to suggest a tautological view that iterations of AHELO will always be predetermined by the flexibility of neoliberalism; rather, the point is to observe and emphasize the mutability and iterations of complex governance projects in which processes rather than outcomes offer compelling accounts of global public policy.

## **Conclusion**

The AHELO feasibility study was designed to capture university data from a number of countries on how well undergraduate students learned academic material across different disciplines. The goal of AHELO was to supplement (if not supplant) global university rankings<sup>13</sup> as a more methodologically robust, peer-reviewed tool to assess institutional quality, teaching effectiveness, and student learning outcomes across different languages, cultures, and countries.

The stakes were high for the OECD as it sought to consolidate its pre-eminence over the field of global education, capitalizing on the success of previous studies like PISA and PIAAC. AHELO represented a bold move into the world of cross-national comparative learning outcomes assessment, but the OECD seemed to be ideally

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Peters (2018: 5) reflects on a “global system of knowledge” promulgated, in part, by “a system of global rankings and methodologies that emerged after 2003 to measure university performance.” The influential rankings regime includes the *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (est. 2003); *Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities* (est. 2007); *QS World University Rankings* (est. 2004); *Times Higher Education World University Rankings* (est. 2004); *University Ranking by Academic Performance* (est. 2009); *QS World University Rankings by Subject* (est. 2011); *US News and World Report Best Global University Rankings*. In addition to global rankings there are national-level rankings including the *Maclean's University Rankings*.

positioned to convene sufficient authority to institutionalize AHELO as a permanent programme, or “main study,” in OECD tertiary education policy.

The “global education policy field” (Lingard et al., 2005; Lingard and Rawolle, 2011) is a multi-scalar dimension in which “global” education comes to be governed by IOs, international experts, and university administrators. Within this field, measurements - including indicators, rankings, and comparative assessments in learning - developed at the global scale increasingly inform education policies and practices on a national and institutional scale. The authority of “policy as numbers” (Rose, 1991; Lingard and Ozga, 2007; Rizvi and Lingard, 2009; Addey, 2014; Addey et al. 2017; Addey and Sellar, 2018) as a mode of education governance is both enabled and contested within this field.

While bringing “legibility” (Scott, 1998) to the field of education assessment, numerical indicators - increasingly evident in tertiary education policy and practice - risks obfuscating and rendering illegible deeper political and social questions around what is being measured and why.

## CHAPTER TWO: A “WIKIPEDIA” ENTRY FOR AHELO<sup>14</sup>

The Assessment for Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) was a cross-national, cross-linguistic feasibility study conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) between 2008 and 2013. AHELO was implemented in 17 higher education systems<sup>15</sup> and tested approximately 23,000 students in 249 universities<sup>16</sup> across three discipline strands: engineering, economics, and “generic skills” - the latter a proxy for analytical reasoning, critical thinking, written communication and problem solving involving “real world” performance tasks (see *method of testing* below for illustrative examples of test questions from each strand).

Survey responses from 669 faculty members were also recorded as part of the “contextual dimension” of learning (see *framework* below).<sup>17</sup> AHELO thus incorporated cognitive assessments alongside contextual survey instruments.<sup>18</sup> Governance of the study (see *organizational structure* below) was shared between the OECD’s Institute for the Management of Higher Education (IMHE) and the Education Policy Committee (EDPC). The EDPC had ultimate authority to recommend to the OECD Council whether to support

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<sup>14</sup> There is no current wikipedia entry for AHELO.

<sup>15</sup> The OECD uses the terms countries and jurisdictions interchangeably, e.g., Ontario was the only jurisdiction in Canada that participated in AHELO.

<sup>16</sup> Universities were chosen for the units of analysis (data was not provided for individual students); the OECD did not specify whether they had to be public or private, research, vocational or technical in nature. The OECD refers to higher education institutions (HEIs) in their publications of the AHELO study (e.g., OECD/GNE: 2010/4).

<sup>17</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2012: 157

<sup>18</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2013: 10



an AHELO main study once the feasibility study concluded. In July 2015 the OECD Council decided not to continue with a main study. In November 2015 the IMHE Governing Board voted not to renew its mandate, which expired in December 31, 2016.<sup>19</sup>

### **Assessment Framework: What Are Learning Outcomes?**

#### ***Defining learning outcomes***

The AHELO feasibility study sought to understand whether learning outcomes could be reliably identified and measured across different languages and higher education systems, offering higher education institutions (HEIs) an evidence-based approach to assessment in a comparative context. Learning outcomes have been defined as “what a learner knows or can do as a result of learning.”<sup>20</sup> Applied to the higher education context, learning outcomes “refer to the personal changes or benefits that follow as a result of students’ engagement in the learning opportunities offered by HEIs.”<sup>21</sup> Outcomes are conceptually different from learning inputs and learning activities, both of which also impact educational outputs. Nusche (2008) elaborates on the distinction: “*Inputs* are the financial, human and material resources used, such as funding and endowments, faculty and administration, buildings and equipment. *Activities* are actions taken or work performed through which inputs are mobilized to produce specific outputs. *Outputs* are

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/imhe/>

<sup>20</sup> Otter, 1992: i

<sup>21</sup> Nusche, 2008: 7

anything that an institution or system produces.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the development of higher education learning outcomes by the OECD at the *global/transnational* level presents a unique challenge for implementation in different higher education institutional settings. In a practical sense a *standardized* AHELO tool would need to be embedded within institutions’ *particular* educational outputs. e.g., as a way to measure what students learn in a “typical” undergraduate degree program.

***What do learning outcomes measure?***

One of the key challenges for the AHELO study was to ensure that learning outcomes were generalizable and comparable while reflecting institutional diversity. The OECD noted that “measurement of educational outcomes is complicated and controversial. It is of crucial importance that an assessment has both reliability and validity. Constructing an assessment that is valid across institutions, cultures and disciplines presents numerous scientific and practical challenges.”<sup>23</sup>

The OECD identified the following main challenges with AHELO (see also *criticism of AHELO* below):

- The diversity of institutions and range of disciplines;
- Scope of the assessment - whether internationally focused or more locally oriented;
- Differences in the political economies of higher education systems;

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> OECD, 2008: 2

- Distinguishing the value added by the institutions (selection and recruitment of “star” students);
- Variation in duration and content of programs;
- Cultural and linguistic diversity;
- Whether learning outcomes actually reflect the skills and knowledge acquired through the programs as intended.<sup>24</sup>

These challenges, identified by the OECD at the outset of the AHELO study (OECD, 2012), anticipate some of the controversies around integrating a standardized assessment tool in a university population where learning outcomes are impacted by innumerable social, cultural, economic and educational variables. Additionally, the OECD may have failed to anticipate concerns from stakeholders, including university associations and faculty, around *why* a “global” learning outcomes assessment should supplant existing assessment tools found within HEIs.

***What is the contextual dimension?***

The “contextual dimension” in AHELO was captured through student and faculty survey responses. These surveys were meant to provide additional background information to “enable detailed analyses of the factors associated with enhanced learning outcomes” within the institution as a way to improve the study’s validity and reliability.<sup>25</sup> The construction of the contextual dimension was undertaken by the Centre for Higher

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2012: 91

Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at University of Twente in collaboration with the Indiana Center for Postsecondary Research. The contextual dimension collected survey responses from students and faculty after having been validated through focus groups of “students and HEI personnel” in Australia, Japan, the Netherlands and the United States.<sup>26</sup>

***What is the “value added” of institutions to learning outcomes?***

The value-added dimension of AHELO feasibility study sought to understand possible methods to capture the “learning gain,” or growth in learning, attributed to the higher education institution “after taking into account the students’ incoming abilities.”<sup>27</sup> The importance placed on capturing learning gain is linked “to [strengthening] the monitoring of public services and focus more directly on driving improvements and increasing cost-effectiveness.”<sup>28</sup> An OECD Expert Group on Value-Added Measurement, lead by Peter Ewell, convened from 2012-13 to devise statistical approaches called “value-added analysis” that

generates adjusted test results by taking into account both differences in the contexts in which institutions operate and differences in their students’ prior academic achievements. These adjusted results, appropriately aggregated, are considered to more closely approximate the relative contributions made by different institutions to their students’ learning outcomes.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Bird et al., 2005; OECD/AHELO, 2013: 10

<sup>29</sup> OECD/AHELO, 213: 11

### **AHELO Governance and Budget**

AHELO was conceptualized, governed, and managed by the OECD with an initial budget of 10 million euros. Contracts for the disciplinary assessment frameworks and testing instruments were tendered to two main contractors, the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) and the US Council for Aid to Education (CAE). Participating countries and jurisdictions funded 84% the study; funding contributions from the Lumina Foundation for Education (United States), the Compagnia di San Paolo (Italy), the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (Portugal), Riksbankens Jubileumfond (Sweden), the Spencer Foundation (United States), the Teagle Foundation (United States), and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (United States) contributed an additional 13% of the funds.<sup>30</sup> The OECD contributed the remaining 3%.

### **AHELO Governance Structure**

The AHELO feasibility study reveals a complex shared governance structure (Figure 3 below) involving technical and political networks steering and managing the AHELO study. “As is commonly the case for large-scale international assessments undertaken by the OECD, international management activities were shared between the OECD Secretariat and a Consortium of contracted organisations with responsibility for operational issues and analysis.”<sup>31</sup>

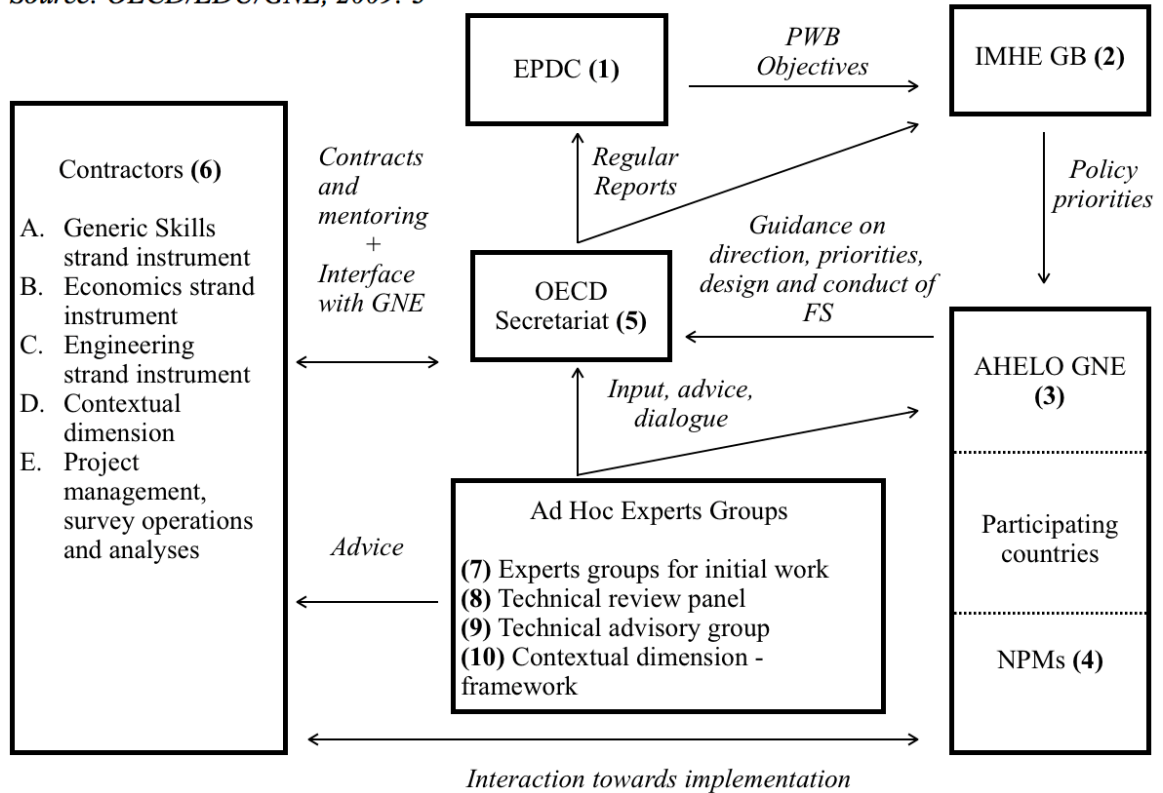
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<sup>30</sup> Lumina Foundation, the Compagnia di San Paolo, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the Teagle Foundation were also part of the AHELO Stakeholders’ Consultative Group (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 214-15) that informed the governance of the study.

<sup>31</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2012: 96

Figure 3: AHELO's governance and organizational structure<sup>32</sup>

Source: OECD/EDU/GNE, 2009: 3



This complex governance structure places the OECD Secretariat (5) at the strategic centre of AHELO. From this position, the Secretariat assigns departmental resources (especially the Directorate for Education and Skills) and convenes working groups, committees and conferences to flesh out the AHELO study. The Secretariat steers AHELO with input from the IMHE Governing Board, which represents the interests of higher education institutions that pay to subscribe to the IMHE's work. The IMHE funnels its policy priorities through the Group of National Experts, a body composed of recognized subject matter experts and OECD country representatives assigned a technical role in the study.

<sup>32</sup> Please refer to the list of abbreviations on p. xi for a description of the acronyms in Figure 3

(See below for a fuller description of each body; Chapter Four disaggregates this governance structure further.)

### ***OECD Council***

The Council is the OECD's "overarching decision-making body."<sup>33</sup> Operating much like the "board of directors of a business corporation," the Council provides "a sense of strategic direction by agreeing to priorities to be considered in the development of more detailed work plans and budgets prepared for boards' later approval."<sup>34</sup> The Council provides political, strategic, resource allocation, budget and performance evaluation roles shared between two sets of members.

The first set of members includes the Ministerial Council. This body is composed of ministers from member countries who meet annually to discuss and ultimately endorse strategic priorities mandated for the Secretariat. AHELO was first conceived at a Meeting of the OECD Council at the Ministerial Level ("MCM"), chaired by Greece's Minister of National Education and Religious Affairs in Athens in 2006.

The second set of members comprises the Council of Permanent Representatives (CPR), the "ambassadorial representatives of members (usually career public servants of medium seniority appointed for three or four years) who meet monthly, with meetings chaired by the Secretary-General."<sup>35</sup> The European Commission is also included in this

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/about/structure/>

<sup>34</sup> Carroll and Kellow, 2011: 10-12

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

body. These representatives played a significant role in bringing committees and working groups together to further conceptualize and operationalize the AHELO study.

### ***The Education Policy Committee (EDPC)***

The Education Policy Committee (identified as EDPC **(1)** in Figure 3) is composed of representatives from OECD members states. EDPC provides strategic direction for all of the OECD's work in education.<sup>36</sup> AHELO's governance was shared between the EDPC and the Institutional Management in Higher Education Governing Board (identified as IMHE GB **(2)** in Figure 3).

Where the EDPC comprises national governments the IMHE GB is constituted by higher education institutions and other members. The steering of AHELO was ultimately guided by the interests of OECD countries via Programme for Work and Budget (PWB) objectives. AHELO's Terms of Reference for the feasibility study were developed between the Secretariat **(5)** and the AHELO Consortium comprised of the principal Contractors **(6)**. These Terms were built into the PWB.

The EDPC was ultimately responsible for deciding whether to endorse an AHELO main study following the completion of the feasibility study.

### ***OECD Secretariat***

The Secretariat (identified as OECD Secretariat **(5)** in Figure 3) is composed of OECD directorates and divisions led by the Secretary-General, who is appointed to a five-year term with "the power to submit proposals to the Council and to appoint required

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<sup>36</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2012: 79



staff.”<sup>37</sup> Here is where AHELO is officially endorsed by the OECD and accorded departmental resources to develop and implement the feasibility study. The Secretariat had the overall responsibility for steering AHELO by commanding the resources of various directorates, divisions, and working groups.

These OECD directorates and divisions (e.g., the Directorate for Education and Skills) work with “a warren of committees and working groups populated by government officials, staff of the OECD secretariat, technical experts and sometimes civil society” to guide policy making in various social and economic areas.<sup>38</sup> The Secretariat employs approximately 3,300 “economists, lawyers, scientists, political analysts, sociologists, digital experts, statisticians and communication professionals.”<sup>39</sup>

***The Programme for the Institutional Management of Higher Education (IMHE)***

The IMHE and its governing board (identified as IMHE GB (2) in Figure 3) represented a network of 246 members from higher education institutions (including faculty and university administrators), governments and agencies across 48 countries.

The IMHE GB “steered” AHELO by identifying the policy priorities emanating from the institutional interests within its membership: “The IMHE GB thus provided a platform for HEIs to engage with governments in AHELO so that the approaches adopted

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 25

<sup>38</sup> Woodward, 2009: 7

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/about/structure/>

took account of institutional needs and concerns.”<sup>40</sup> It communicated these priorities to the AHELO Group of National Experts (identified as AHELO GNE **(3)** in Figure 3), an important locus of political authority whose members were nominated by OECD countries. Based on input from the Ad Hoc Experts Group (identified in **(7-10)** in Figure 3), the GNE provided technical validation of the IMHE’s policy priorities to the OECD Secretariat.

The IMHE GB determined AHELO’s policy objectives and goals; ensured compliance with these objectives at key project milestones; and provided a forum in which participating countries, HEIs and agencies could be informed of all aspects of AHELO implementation.<sup>41</sup>

The IMHE mandate was dissolved in December 2016. Currently (as of 2022), higher education research and analysis at the OECD are channeled through the Higher Education Policy Team and coordinated through the overall direction of the EDPC. The Labour Market Relevance and Outcomes of Higher Education Project (LMRO), a cross-national initiative developed through the Higher Education Policy Team, suggests an iteration of AHELO’s core conceptual goals.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Group of National Experts (GNE)***

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/higher-education-policy/>

The AHELO Group of National Experts (identified as AHELO GNE **(3)** in Figure 3) was the central locus of political-technical authority in the AHELO feasibility study. Reporting to the OECD Secretariat, the GNE was composed of members nominated by OECD countries to oversee decisions concerning methods, timing, and principles related to AHELO's technical, contracting, and financing aspects.

The GNE was responsible for validating the work of the Technical Review Panel (identified as TRP **(8)** in Figure 3), a body composed of “five individuals with strong policy, technical, or budget expertise in the area of large-scale international assessments.”<sup>43</sup> The TRP reviewed and validated the technical aspects of contractor bids received in response to the AHELO Call for Tenders.

The GNE relied on a second expert group, the Technical Advisory Group (TAG), to provide “international expertise and advice” on the AHELO's operational and methodological issues, include the development and validation of survey instruments, questionnaires, and assessment frameworks. TAG recommendations fed into the contractors' (see AHELO consortium below) design and implementation of AHELO.

While the TAG's activities were initially managed by the Consortium, a revised Terms of Reference for the study (2010) saw the TAG take on additional project management responsibilities “as well as providing overall quality control for the study.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2012: 99

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

As a result of these increased political functions, TAG oversight was redirected to the OECD Secretariat.

### ***The AHELO Consortium***

The AHELO Consortium (identified as Contractors **(6)** in Figure 3) was the principal body of technical and subject matter experts in the AHELO study. Together with the Ad Hoc Expert Groups these 11 contractors formed the basis of expert or “epistemic” authority in the OECD study.

The Consortium was responsible for designing and managing AHELO implementation across the 17 higher education systems participating in the study. The international Consortium was managed by the lead contractor, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), when it was appointed mid-project in 2010.<sup>45</sup> According to the AHELO Terms of Reference,<sup>46</sup> in addition to developing technical tools the Consortium “was formed to maximise synergies across the different strands of the feasibility study, streamline communications and generate economies of scale.”<sup>47</sup>

The Consortium managed field implementation for AHELO’s technical instruments by overseeing and liaising with National Project Managers (identified as NPMs **(4)** in Figure 3), who were responsible for deploying the testing instruments and contextual surveys in the HEIs within their respective countries/jurisdictions.

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<sup>45</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2012: 96

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/43370974.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2012: 97

The AHELO consortium was composed of the following contractors:

1. ACER, who had previous experience managing PISA projects in addition to other large-scale assessments in education throughout the Asia-Pacific region and Europe (<https://www.acer.org/au/>). Offering “research-based knowledge, products and services that can be used to improve learning across the lifespan,” ACER was the lead contractor and administered the technical management of the AHELO. It identifies as a non-profit, non-governmental organization that produces “evidence-based expertise covers policy research, selection testing, student engagement, performance measurement, program benchmarking, outcomes assessment and graduate destinations. Advanced capabilities include project design and management, consultation and facilitation, research review, sample design, instrument development, data collection, and psychometric and statistical analysis.”<sup>48</sup>
2. The cApStAn Linguistic Quality Control Agency, who brought linguistic and translation experience from PISA and PIAAC projects (<https://www.capstan.be>)
3. The Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), an education research and policy centre combining research with education, training and consultancy services that led the development, along with the Indiana

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<sup>48</sup> <http://www.acer.edu.au/about>

University Center for Post Secondary Research, of the contextual survey questionnaires (<https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/cheps/>);

4. The Indiana University Center for Post Secondary Research (CPR), which houses the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE formed the basis for the student surveys as part of the “contextual dimension” of the study;
5. The Council for Aid to Education (CAE), which developed the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) instrument to measure learning outcomes in generic skills. CAE was awarded the initial contract for the AHELO generic skills strand prior to the Call for Tenders in 2010;
6. The Educational Testing Services (ETS), with international experience developing assessment questionnaires. ETS was the main contractor in the development of the economics disciplinary assessment;
7. The International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA) Data Processing and Research Center (DPC), with experience in data processing for large-scale surveys;
8. The National Institute for Educational Policy Research (NIER), an educational research and development agency in Japan with experience in OECD, IEA, UNESCO and APEC projects “of direct relevance to AHELO”;
9. SoNET Systems, providing online testing systems for large-scale software and IT infrastructure projects;

10. Statistics Canada, who helped launch the International Adult Literacy Survey (1994), one of the OECD's first international large-scale assessments in comparative education;<sup>49</sup> Stats Canada contributed to research and policy analysis for AHELO; and

11. The University of Florence School of Engineering who, together with NIER, was the main contractor for the AHELO engineering strand. The University of Florence School of Engineering "has conducted significant work on engineering education, most recently via its leadership of the European and Global Engineering and Education academic network (EUGENE) representing 76 international partners."<sup>50</sup>

### **Method of testing**

#### ***Sampling of students and faculty***

AHELO tested approximately 23,000 students in their final year of a typical 3- or 4-year undergraduate degree through probability sampling. Sampling of the contextual surveys and tests, essential to the content validity of the instruments, were scheduled one month prior to testing.

The generic skills strand targeted students in any program offered at their university; the economics and engineering strands required graduating students with a

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<sup>49</sup> <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/89M0014X>

<sup>50</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2012: 97

significant component (2/3) of credits earned in their respective departments.<sup>51</sup> Student response rates were highly variable despite a target sampling of 75% of students in each of the participating HEIs. These rates were hypothesized to correlate, firstly, to sampling method; secondly, to size and cohesiveness of cohort; and thirdly, to institutional/systemic factors. These correlational factors are briefly elaborated below.

Firstly, HEIs obtained average response rates of 89%, 68% and 51% through a census selection method, non-random selection method, and random sampling method, respectively; students who were asked to participate through census had more positive response rates, whereas random sampling produced comparatively fewer positive response rates across sampled institutions.

Secondly, the OECD suggested that higher response rates were likely correlated with cohort effects: response rates were higher in engineering students where the cohort of graduating students was smaller, more discipline-specific, and familiar with accreditation assessments in existing curricula/program design.

Thirdly, very low participation rates across all strands in some European countries, specifically Finland, Norway and Netherlands, contrasted sharply to higher rates of participation in non-OECD members (Colombia,<sup>52</sup> Egypt, Russia and Abu Dhabi). Student response rates were variable within countries, too. For the economics test, one Mexican university recorded a 46.2% participation rate while another obtained a 100%

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<sup>51</sup> More on sampling methodology can be found in Chapter 5 of OECD/AHELO, 2012

<sup>52</sup> Colombia acceded to the OECD in 2020.



response rate. Quoted the Norwegian NPM: “it may be that being chosen to participate in such an international study is seen as an honour or an obligation in some countries, but Norwegian students did not seem to consider participation in such terms.”<sup>53</sup>

Again, smaller cohorts may have produced higher response rates, yet this does not explain lower response rates in higher education systems with comparable cohort size. Despite high engagement and generous incentives to participate, Nordic institutions scored very low rates possibly because they lack authority to compel student participation. Colombia, on the other hand, made the AHELO testing compulsory by integrating the generic skills and engineering tests with final exams. The variability of response rates in different national settings (see Table 2 below) brings into focus the authority of students to enable or to contest AHELO. This authority highlights the critical role that institutional actors, including students, play in the global governance of higher education.

*Table 2: Student response rates by strand and country (%)*

Strand	Country	Minimum (%)	Median (%)	Maximum
Generic skills	Colombia	91.5	95.0	99.0
	Egypt	43.5	75.0	94.0
	Finland	3.5	11.8	31.5
	Korea	37.7	52.3	62.3

<sup>53</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2013a: 130

	Kuwait	17.8	30.7	39.5
	Mexico	32.0	78.5	94.7
	Norway	4.7	8.3	10.0
	Slovak Rep.	16.9	55.3	96.3
	USA (CT, MO, PA)	4.0	29.5	66.8
Economics	Belgium (Flanders)	19.1	46.6	74.2
	Egypt	38.2	53.8	78.5
	Italy	7.5	39.6	79.3
	Mexico	46.2	83.0	100.0
	Netherlands	3.8	4.1	4.4
	Russian Federation	54.5	88.3	100.0
	Slovak Rep.	32.5	78.8	92.9
Engineering	Abu Dhabi	77.2	96.6	100.0
	Australia	12.3	16.8	98.1
	Canada (Ontario)	--	58.8	79.2
	Colombia	79.2	97.9	100.0
	Egypt	60.5	87.0	93.8
	Japan	13.9	81.1	95.0
	Mexico	70.0	86.1	97.8
	Russian Federation	80.0	91.5	100.0
	Slovak Rep.	50.5	68.6	78.3

(Source: OECD/AHELO, 2012: 162)

### *Technology*

Standardized administration of testing instruments was pivotal to the implementation of the feasibility study. The SoNET assessment system, developed by one of the Consortium partners, required specific software and infrastructure requirements to properly administer the online computer delivery of the tests. In response to technological demands Egypt, for example, developed an IT strategy with two different internet providers to ensure facilities across its 19 participating universities had adequate bandwidth, data security and vulnerability monitoring during testing (OECD/AHELO, 2013: 75).

In some institutional settings, poor internet connections or security settings (firewalls, pop-up blockers) impeded smooth functionality. One university lost 90% of its data “due to instability in third-party JSON library software applications;”<sup>54</sup> in another university, over 1,000 students attempted to access the economics strand test, overloading and ultimately crashing the server.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, the generic skills strand incorporated two different platforms - the constructed-response tasks (CRTs) were developed by the CAE while the multiple choice questions were provided by ACER<sup>56</sup> - which “required integrating their functionalities to ensure a seamless transition” between the systems. In

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<sup>54</sup> OECD/AHELO, 2012: 160

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> OECD/OECD, 2012: 114

two of the HEIs, video recording equipment was installed to invigilate the tests in an attempt to prevent plagiarism.<sup>57</sup>

***Test items for engineering, economics and generic skills strands***

The AHELO Feasibility Study Report - Volume 1 (OECD/AHELO, 2012) provides samples of constructed-response task (CRT) questions for each of the strands; multiple choice questions for AHELO were not included in the report because “the Generic Skills MCQs are owned by ACER and they are of commercial value. As a result, ACER did not consent to the publication of the Generic Skills MCQs” (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 237).

Further, testing items “were not developed or intended for public release, or to be used to depict the test,” but were developed “for a specific purpose and time and for use in specific countries [and] would be modified and enhanced in light of results if they were to go full scale” (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 219).

An example of a constructed-response task question for the generic skills strand is identified below. The question would include a “Document Library” with graphs, articles, and assorted reference material with which students would be expected to answer the CRT question. Rubrics were used to score learning outcomes on the basis of analytical reasoning and evaluation, problem solving, and writing effectiveness (*ibid.*, 234-36).

Instructions: You are a member of the administrative staff for the City of Milltown. The Mayor’s Office has received many inquiries from the public and

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

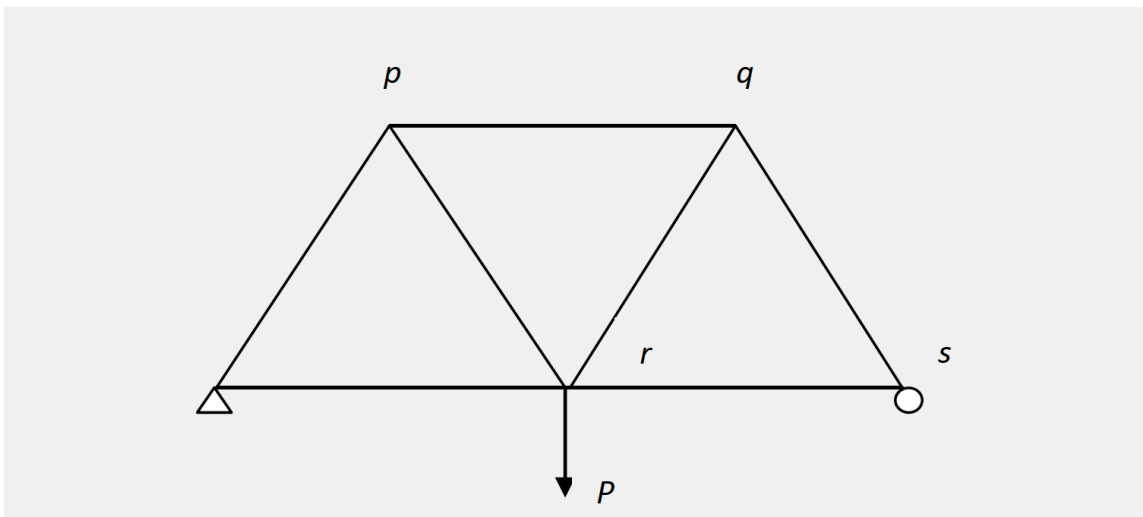
press regarding the recent discovery of a deformed catfish in Miracle Lake. The Mayor of Milltown, Sally Bigelow, plans to discuss this matter at the Milltown City Council meeting tomorrow night. To help Mayor Bigelow prepare for tomorrow's meeting, she has asked you to review the documents provided in the Document Library (on the right side of the screen) and answer a series of questions. Your answers to the questions that follow should describe all the details necessary to support your position. Your answers will be judged not only on the accuracy of the information you provide, but also how clearly the ideas are presented, how effectively the ideas are organized, how thoroughly the information is covered. While your personal values and experiences are important, please answer all the questions solely on the basis of the information above and in the Document Library. Write your answers in the box below each question. You can write as much as you wish; you are not limited by the size of the box on the screen (*ibid.*, 220).

Similarly, CRT questions in the economics strand aimed to uncover analytical reasoning and problem-solving by presenting students with “real world” economics problems. For example, a CRT question for economics would be modelled on an article written by an economist on global economic conditions in 2008-2009. The student would be expected to discuss the following statement by making reference to regional trade agreements, tariffs, and economic competitiveness against the backdrop of the global financial crisis :

While middle-income countries have pursued regional trade agreements since the 1960s, these ties are becoming more important as the global economic crisis curtails demand from the United States and other major markets. With the Doha

Round of multilateral trade talks stalled, regional trade agreements (RTAs) offer an alternative approach to increase trade, spur stronger economic growth, and lower unemployment rates in participating countries (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 238).

For the MCQ engineering strand questions students were presented with an engineering problem such as the one below, where a load ( $P$ ) is applied to a Warren truss, and required to select a correct statement (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 265):



### **Global rankings**

AHELO was designed to offer an evidence-based approach to ranking universities on the basis of learning outcomes as proxies for institutional quality. In theory, AHELO would give those universities without global reputation for research excellence a more level playing field when it came to attracting students. One senior OECD director

(retired) with detailed knowledge of AHELO described the “zero-sum” impact of the global rankings regime on perceptions of university performance:

[The] international rankings that are currently available - for all the care that goes into compiling them - fall far short of capturing the range and depth of what universities and other higher education institutions do. Accountability and transparency are essential and rankings have a valuable contribution to make. However when tools intended to provide information for students and their families are used to drive political and strategic decisions we have a problem. This is a zero-sum game: there will only ever be 100 universities in the ‘top’ 100. Rankings may be inconvenient, but they will not go away. They are not a disease, they are a symptom: a symptom of a lack of accountability and transparency which needs to be treated.<sup>58</sup>

The OECD thus “diagnoses” the symptoms associated with a corrupt global university rankings regime that “needs to be treated.” Of these symptoms, “political and strategic decisions” made on the basis of opaque criteria seem to be the most nefarious.

Accordingly, the OECD’s counter- narrative is one that emphasizes a more robust scientific method in the evaluation of institutional quality. Here the OECD is competing for the recognition of its (scientific) authority, drawing expressly on the legitimacy of its “epistemological” governance (Lingard and Sellar, 2014).

### **Criticism**

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<sup>58</sup> <https://community.oecd.org/community/educationtoday/blog/2011/05/16/rankings-are-not-a-disease-they-are-a-symptom>

The OECD's ambition to create a cross-national, comparative tool to measure learning outcomes faced criticism among stakeholder groups in the academic community and in the academic literature. This criticism grew as AHELO evolved over its seven-year policy life cycle, reaching a crescendo in May 2015 with the publication of a letter by Universities Canada and the American Council for Education (UC/ACE) denouncing AHELO's methodology and goals. This criticism pointed to the conceptual and methodological difficulty in applying a value-added dimension to diverse institutional settings, compounded by a dearth of data into how such value-added can, or should be, measured.<sup>59</sup> Further, university organizations in Canada and the United States objected to being excluded from the feasibility study's initial development, criticized the OECD for misconstruing the purpose of learning outcomes, and ultimately questioned the value of AHELO as framed by the OECD.<sup>60</sup>

The AHELO feasibility study has received comparatively little attention in the academic literature. Of note, however, is Harmsen and Braband's (2019) organizational analysis of AHELO's "failure." Their criticism centres on the OECD's inability to convene sufficient internal authority for AHELO - with particular reference to budgetary constraints and a tertiary education file seemingly adrift without clear ownership in OECD programming. (Chapter Three of my dissertation examines the merits of this argument in more detail.) Other scholars in the postcolonial tradition (e.g., Shahajan,

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<sup>59</sup> <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20150515064746124>

<sup>60</sup> [https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server\\_files/files/ACE-UC%20AHELO%20Letter.pdf](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/ACE-UC%20AHELO%20Letter.pdf)



2013; Shahjahan and Morgan, 2014) criticize AHELO's Eurocentric biases and its reproduction of colonial hierarchies in the global political system. The thrust of this "world systems theory" argument is that the circulation of education data reinforces and chiefly benefits predominantly Euro-American institutions.

The following chapter reviews theoretical approaches that help explain the global governance of higher education.

### **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCHING AHELO**

Building from the previous chapter's encyclopedic description of AHELO, the present chapter surveys three principal bodies of academic literature in order to locate AHELO - and the OECD's global education work more broadly - within a delimited range of theoretical approaches, and then builds on these to develop the approach that guides this study: a governance fields approach. The three bodies of literature are (1) an organizational discourse perspective, (2) a human capital perspective, and (3) integrated perspectives drawn from international relations (IR), global political economy (GPE), and global governance literatures. Strengths and limitations from each of these literatures are considered in turn.

The chapter then turns to my approach, which draws together insights from these three bodies of literature and integrates them with the concept of governance fields. The concept of governance fields has been fruitful in the global education policy and sociology field and "policy as numbers" described by an emerging research community loosely affiliated under the umbrella of International Assessment Studies ("IAS") (Rose, 1991; Lingard and Ozga, 2007; Rizvi and Lingard, 2009; Addey, 2014; Addey et al. 2017; Addey and Sellar, 2018). I review this literature but add to it by adding insights inspired by the other three bodies of literature that this chapter reviews.

#### **Approaches to Theorizing Global Education Governance**

The bodies of theory I review together comprise the most important or insightful sources of analysis of global education governance, with each one highlighting different features of this governance.

The organizational discourse analysis offers a way to conceptualize how the OECD convenes internal and external sources of authority in global education governance. While it has useful insights, both as an object of study and a way to understand the OECD's role, it obscures some key factors that are at play in global education governance, including the interplay of global and sub-national contexts.

The human capital approach is the more theoretical economic approach that underpins the OECD's own conceptualization. Understanding this approach helps in understanding the OECD's motivations, but I go beyond these and treat human capital as a governing rationality linked to education neoliberalism and academic capitalism.

The literatures from IR, GPE and global governance provide valuable additional insights into how inequalities in power relations among states and regions interact with global education governance, and the complex forms of transnational governance that have emerged in our contemporary world.

The fourth approach, which guides this study, is centred on the concept of governance fields. This approach draws on global education and policy literatures and especially highlights how the authority and legitimacy of actors in any given field is determined by a competition for recognition (Sending, 2015: 21-23) shaped also by the political economy and other factors identified in my review of the other literatures. My

dissertation presents global education governance as a field in which different actors compete for recognition of authority in the higher education policy environment. In some OECD contexts, including the case studies presented in my dissertation, expert authority must compete with academic and university actors, governmental authorities and quality assurance agencies, and even the authority of indicators like global university rankings. A fields approach is therefore most appropriate in theorizing how various actors, institutions and technologies constitute authority in global education governance.

My dissertation ultimately builds on existing literatures including elements from governance field theory in order to provide a nuanced and indeed novel contribution to global education governance literature. In this dissertation I contribute to theorization of global higher education governance by interrogating important assumptions about sources of authority and legitimacy in global higher education projects such as AHELO.

In particular, my research shows that projects such as AHELO are often portrayed as powerful and inexorable expressions of neoliberalism, globalization, the audit society or the dominance of wealthy states of the world; rather, the deployment of global higher education studies involve tenuous constructions that integrate legitimacy and stakeholders at transnational, national, and subnational levels.

Projects in global higher education thus draw upon technical feasibility as much as moral and epistemic legitimacy in convening authority. Throughout my review of approaches I am especially interested in how policy failures such as AHELO's may be conceptualized.

### **Organizational discourse**

This first part of this section explains some of the important theoretical features of organizational discourse. The second part highlights how authority is convened within and across the OECD's bureaucratic structures. An example of how policy failure is treated within the literature brings AHELO's policy failure into clearer theoretical focus. The final section considers some of the principle limitations of the organizational discourse literature.

As a theoretical approach applied to the study of bureaucratic organization and management (Grant et al. 2001; Philips and Oswick, 2012), organizational discourse proposes that linguistic and semiotic resources (texts, publications, expert studies) combine with a "mode of thinking" to produce a "social construction of reality" (van Dijk, 1997; Grant et al. 2001) and the emergence of new, or modified, policies.

This approach is fruitful because intergovernmental organizations (IOs) like the OECD are aptly described by Trondal et al. (2013) as compound bureaucracies "exhibiting intergovernmental, supranational, departmental and epistemic dynamics that may variably both reinforce and conflict with one another" (Harmsen and Braband, 2019: 3). These reinforcing and conflicting tendencies endemic to IOs are usefully exhibited through the lens of organizational discourse analysis.

The production of particular texts, as well as their access and control, reflects and contributes to "inequalities in power" (Grant et al. 2001: 7), revealing this approach to be

a method of critical analysis as much as a theoretical approach (Phillips and Oswick, 2012). Fairclough (1995: 2) argues that the “power to control discourse is seen as the power to sustain particular discursive practices with particular ideological investments in dominance over other alternative (including oppositional) practices.”

Locating these discursive practices and tracing their effects on the social construction of education knowledge positions my study to better understand areas of (contested) authority in OECD education and within/among global education governance more broadly. The internal convening of authority is required to sustain AHELO as a main study in OECD programming. The external dimension is most visible in the OECD’s social construction of AHELO as a counterbalance to the global university rankings regime. Each of these contestations involve what Bieber (2015) terms “discursive dissemination” of AHELO’s goals, priorities, and mode of governance. Organizational discourse literature thus helps explain how seemingly incommensurate ideas and positions are overcome to produce new, or modified, policies and practices.

While organizational discourse sheds some light on the nature (and limitations) of bureaucratic authority,<sup>61</sup> I consider its principal analytical advantage to be the focus on policy processes rather than policy outcomes. A focus on process is especially relevant given the limited authority of the OECD to implement public policy at sub/national levels. Organizational discourse brings to light the *iterative* nature of policy that

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<sup>61</sup> A key shortcoming of this approach is its a priori assignment of authority to what are inherently unstable material representations (e.g., texts and official policy documents). I provide an elaboration of this critique in the section on governance fields.

distinguishes its approach from analyses rooted in the “sediment of past practices” informing “bureaucratic culture” approaches to public policy (Mahon, 2011: 573). Discourse can be therefore be considered performative, intentional and transformational in a way that surmounts the path dependencies theorized to circumscribe policy options in historical institutionalist literature (Pierson, 2000).<sup>62</sup>

In her discourse analysis of the OECD’s *Jobs Strategy*, Mahon provides a compelling example of how OECD “texts offer insights into the prism through which the Secretariat has come to the view the world,” which, “in turn, structure their communication with national officials, other IOs and the public” (2011: 573).<sup>63</sup> Indeed, this observation echoes Harmsen and Braband’s assertion that the OECD Secretariat framed AHELO through a fairly narrow world view that was ultimately challenged by alternative voices within the IMHE (the governing body representing higher education institutions at the OECD). Texts, working group meetings, and conference proceedings all reinforce the OECD’s “cognitive governance” (Woodward, 2009) function - its ability to align values and norms and to shape a particular world view among its members.

Mahon shows how a re-conceptualized *Jobs Strategy* attempted to incorporate alternative social policy narratives into a framework dominated by the OECD’s neoliberal economic policy discourse (2011: 574). The key discursive feature was the way in which

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<sup>62</sup> AHELO’s characterization as a “PISA for higher education” suggests a path dependency in OECD education. Yet, as my empirical research demonstrates, this characterization is both incomplete and misleading.

<sup>63</sup> Mahon’s analysis informs my own approach to understanding AHELO’s human capital and neoliberal underpinnings considered in the following section.

“employment” and “equality” were framed as mutually inclusive policy goals within the revamped *Strategy* document. The the OECD ultimately adopted a “flexicurity” approach that left neoliberal economic orthodoxy relatively intact while permitting elements of social liberalism to “[soften] the impact of [market-based] prescriptions” (2011: 587-88).

A pertinent finding from Mahon’s analysis of *Jobs* is the way multiple, and often competing, discourses may be accommodated within organizations. This perspective points toward the convening of internal authority in OECD and suggests explanations for how complex education studies are implemented on a global scale and across variable bureaucratic structures (e.g., education bureaucracies in participating countries). Indeed, a revised scoping paper for an AHELO main study, presented in 2015 following the completion of the feasibility study, illustrates how competing discourses may (not) be accommodated alongside a particular set of policy preferences. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six, discursive manoeuvrings proved insufficient in establishing the OECD’s authority to continue with an AHELO main study.

Because organizational discourse foregrounds the way texts, language and meaning mediate authority among actors, this theory is especially apt for the study of global education. An important methodological contribution to the literature by Phillips and Oswick analyzes “organizational discourse based on *within* domain and *across* domain characterizations” (2012: 435; emphasis original). This approach offers a way to map the social construction of AHELO within the OECD, e.g., how the study convenes

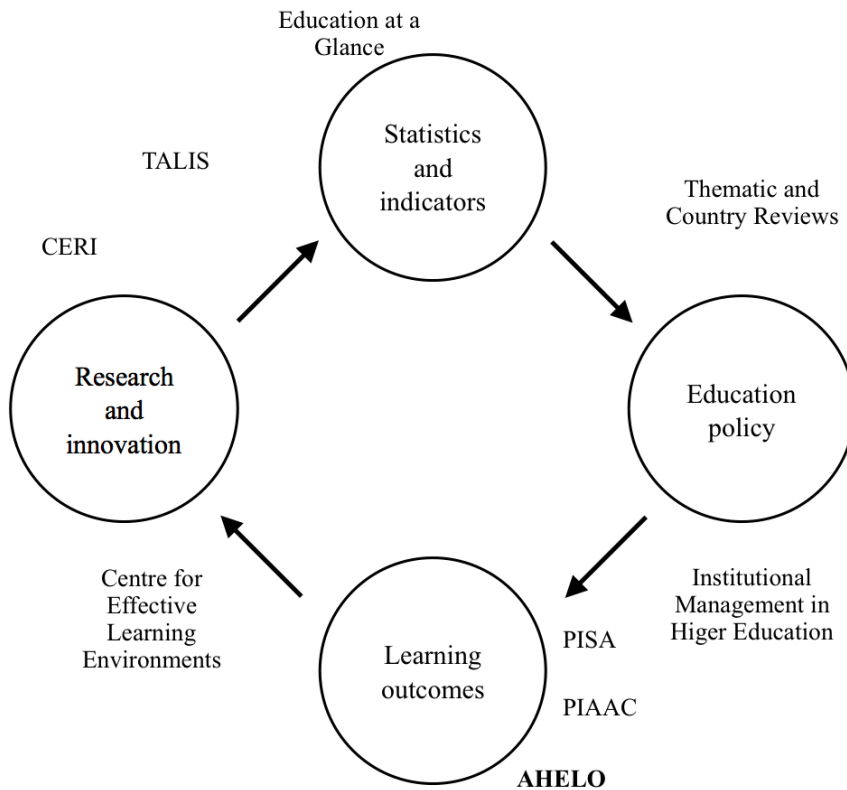


support and authority from relevant directorates, including Education and Skills, Economics, and others with an interest in measuring learning outcomes.

***Convening internal authority in OECD education***

As a compound bureaucracy (Trondal et al., 2013), the OECD must convene support and legitimacy within key departmental policy areas and across various stakeholder communities.

*Figure 4: The OECD's integrated education model*



(Source: OECD, 2010).

Figure 4 illustrates an example of the OECD's organizational discourse in higher education, which follows an integrated approach that draws on the policy expertise of economists, lawyers, statisticians, analysts and administrators in the production of education policy. Country, sectoral and thematic reviews in education generate data used in comparative analysis from which best practices and benchmarks in education are established. Ultimately, the OECD's discursive and evidentiary authority underlying these comparative data inform national and sub-national policy making.

This model shows that education policy does not occur in a linear fashion. Instead, the model evidences bureaucratic processes in which ideas are shared, contested, and ultimately developed within the organizational structure. Rather than view policy making as a linear or top-down process where "expressed intentions precede action," it is more apt to consider policy implementation as nonlinear, unpredictable and uncertain (Hudson et al., 2019: 1-2; Brathwaite, 2018).

The process of developing a tool like AHELO is channeled through different departments, committees, and OECD personnel possessed of various interests and decision-making authority. Comparative data like those generated through the "family of assessments" (OECD, 2013) - PISA, PIAAC and AHELO - are discursively disseminated via key publications integrating the data within a broader organizational narrative. The *AHELO Feasibility Study* reports, which provide empirical insight into how the OECD

convenes technical authority in global education, are examples of this integrated, iterative bureaucratic model.<sup>64</sup>

While discursive dissemination may produce consensus for implementation, it also provides a basis for conflict and contestation within the organizational structure. In one of the only organizational accounts of AHELO's policy "failure," Harmsen and Braband (2019: 11) recall that in "designing AHELO, the OECD secretariat followed its conventional approach, seeking to construct a policy problem that privileged its own pivotal role as the central authority defining both the parameters of debate and the relevant evidential bases."

The circular and insulated policy environment of the OECD's integrated model may, in fact, have undermined "a strong expert consensus" dissuading governments from further investment in the AHELO main study (Harmsen and Braband 2019: 8-12).<sup>65</sup> This analysis would suggest the novel ideas generated through organizational discourse are sometimes insufficient to overcome "sediment of past practices" informing bureaucratic culture. That AHELO was repeatedly described as a "PISA for higher education" (OECD, 2013a: 58; personal interview, OECD/EDU: March 2013) may have further repelled stakeholders from what was perceived as a standard-setting tool amid institutionally diverse contexts.

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<sup>64</sup> These reports are discussed in detail throughout chapters three and four.

<sup>65</sup> My empirical chapters uncover additional explanations for AHELO's failure.

Indeed, vocal pushback from stakeholder communities across the OECD education landscape underscores the political processes involved in convening internal authority for global education. The AHELO feasibility study attracted strong opposition from important sub-national elements, most importantly university faculty and university associations. Seeking to reimagine the scope of a future AHELO main study in April 2015, Andreas Schleicher, Director of OECD Education and Skills, doubled down by asserting “it’s hard to improve what isn’t measured.” The OECD would therefore expand the scope of disciplines to be tested, improve data handling tools and technology, and enrol an Academic Advisory Group composed of academic stakeholders within AHELO’s governance structure at the initial phase.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, a second germane observation from Mahon’s discourse analysis of *Jobs* concerns the way “discursive themes are translated into calculative techniques through the development of new statistical indicators as these constitute the basis for future benchmarking exercises” (2011: 573). This observation points to the ambiguity of policy failure within organizational discourse literature: If policy failure is interpretive rather than objective, as McConnell insists, failure is rarely complete and unequivocal (McConnell, 2015).

While less attentive to broader ideological underpinnings or the sensitive interplay between global and (sub)national variables, the organizational discourse approach lends perspective on how the OECD pursues and convenes internal authority. In a more limited

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<sup>66</sup> Accessed at <https://prezi.com/bnpgqwaq7mbz/ahelo-strategy/>

way, organizational discourse also permits a way to theorize how the OECD convenes external authority in the global education policy field characterized, increasingly, by global rankings and other benchmarking tools.

### ***Convening external authority in global education***

While amassing support for education projects from within its bureaucratic structure, the OECD must also convene “external” authority in order to enact its global education agenda. This section focuses on the history of policy coproduction between the OECD and European Commission and the OECD’s enlargement strategy that seeks engagement with non-OECD countries.

Sotiria Grek (2014; 2018) describes a transnational environment of policy coproduction where education policy is mobilized through “competitive collaboration” (Braband and Harmsen, 2019; Grek, 2014) between the OECD and the European Commission. Competitive collaboration implies that “two organizations [mobilize] around common policy objectives while at the same time [continue] to position themselves as distinctive policy actors within the space” (Harmsen and Braband, 2019: 4).

Coproduction thus draws on the comparative strengths of the respective organizations - such that the EC provides the legal and institutional framework to implement education policies developed through data generated through the OECD’s

evidence-based approaches.<sup>67</sup> Yet each organization draws a separate source of legitimacy within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) context: where the OECD draws its epistemological legitimacy from its statistics, technical data and policy analysis, the EC sources its own legitimacy through legal instruments inherent in its constitution.

The creation of the EHEA and the Bologna Declaration, which created post-secondary degree and learning outcome parity across the eurozone as a way to inform labour market policies (Grek, 2014), is exemplary of education coproduction. In this example, the OECD and EC develop education policies that are aligned with labour market objectives across the eurozone. (Coproduction is distinct from multilateralism, which is considered further below in the section on IR theory).

Grek further notes the effect of OECD educational research, when implemented through the legal instruments of the EC, conveys the impression of a homogenous policy script that appears commonsensical and appropriate to local policy conditions. This “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olsen, 2004) is a powerful discursive tool that normalizes OECD principles within various domestic policy contexts. The effect of coupling with the EC, which possesses legal authority, is to further concretize the OECD’s organizational discourse. The policy effect of technical expertise is a long-standing theme in public

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<sup>67</sup> Although it does not vote or adopt legal Acts submitted to the OECD Council, the Commission’s relationship to the OECD is unique: “The representative of the Commission has almost the same rights as Member countries. He or she has the right to speak at any point and not just at the end of a session as is often the case for observers. He or she may be elected as a member of the bureau of subsidiary bodies, participate fully in the preparation of texts, including legal acts and has an unrestricted right to make proposals and suggest changes” (<https://www.oecd.org/legal/europeancommissionstatus.htm>)

policy literature (Haas, 1992) and hints at the mechanisms by which epistemic communities guide policy making - especially in innovative or otherwise murky policy conditions.

Where the OECD's policy coordination with the EC in the European regional context may be more established, its ability to convene authority beyond the OECD membership is more tentative and ad hoc. The OECD's Global Relations strategy outlines the organization's priorities with respect to engaging non-members, yet this outreach strategy must consistently align with the Articles, vision and mission of the OECD - which are premised on a (neo)liberal economic orthodoxy and a commitment to shared governance underpinned by democratic principles.

The OECD's felt need to engage with the world, encapsulated by its founding Articles, in fact belies the tension in a global outreach strategy. More precisely, this tension reflects an organizational discourse that must balance competing priorities that overlay organizational conflict, tension and contestation. As Mundy and Verger (2015) observe in their analysis of the World Bank, periodic crisis and ambiguity are endemic to the workings of IOs.<sup>68</sup>

In a 2004 keynote address on global expansion, the Japanese ambassador to the OECD urged the organization to set aside political differences in developing a comprehensive strategy for outreach and enlargement:

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<sup>68</sup> See Mundy and Verger (2015) for an account of organizational crisis at the World Bank.

We cannot let the OECD drift without a future vision based on principles and supported by a strategy, simply handling waiting lists and allowing narrow interests to prevail in the name of political realism. I believe that many Member countries and the Secretariat sense that OECD is at a crossroads and that our decision on enlargement and outreach will be of vital importance for the future of the Organisation. We know now that we must rise to the occasion and go beyond individual political interests (OECD, 2004).

This political tension is perhaps most acutely felt in the organization's global education mandate. China's PISA experience in 2018 is instructive in this regard.

PISA incorporates powerful discursive tools that benchmark the performance of students from different countries against an OECD standard. The "unexpected" surge of Chinese students to the top of global PISA rankings in 2012 and 2018 triggered accusations from the media that compelled the OECD to articulate a forceful defence of its methodology. Following publication of PISA results, the Washington Post and Time magazine accused China of systemic cheating and fraud, suggesting resident migrants were excluded from the student sample. The OECD responded to these allegations by claiming that "[anyone] who really wants to find out can review the underlying data...Still, it seems to be easier to cling to old stereotypes than keep up with changes on the ground."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> China was accused of sample bias in the 2012 round of PISA, where it ranked #1 in each of the three testing streams. The Washington Post alleged that Chinese government authorities excluded migrant children from testing, thereby bringing PISA into disrepute (accessed online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2019/12/04/china-is-no-pisa-heres-why-its-test-scores-are-hard-believe/>). <https://oecdeditoday.com/are-the-chinese-cheating-in-pisa-or-are-we-cheating-ourselves/> on June 2, 2022).



This appeal to the pragmatic legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) of OECD data is a key discursive move by the OECD to cement the authority and influence of its cross-national studies in education. An organizational discourse perspective highlights the way data and indicators stand in as discursive devices to frame (sensitive) questions around education politics around the globe. Here the “underlying data” is depicted as the arbiter of truth because it cuts across politics (and different political systems).

In this manner the shortcomings of Harmsen and Braband’s failure analysis (Harmsen and Braband, 2019) come into focus. Their analysis of AHELO’s failure to convene sufficient bureaucratic authority and resources within the OECD overlooks exogenous factors at national and subnational levels. Whereas Harmsen and Braband focus almost exclusively on bureaucratic path dependencies, my study points to a more complex struggle over legitimacy and authority unfolding at different scales of analysis.

### ***Limitations of organizational discourse approaches***

The organizational discourse literature points to ways in which the OECD convenes internal and external authority in global education. Important OECD publications like *Jobs, Skills* and the more recent *AHELO Feasibility Study* reports permit insight into the mobilization of ideas, texts and discourses as objects of study. Yet there are three principle limitations with this approach.

First, organizational discourse obscures context-specific dynamics that enable or resist policy implementation. This is problematic because the “sediment of past practices” (Mahon, 2011: 573) often does inform bureaucratic culture as well as the broader political

economy within which organizational practices evolve. One example of this in global education is the way AHELO has been described as a “PISA for higher education” (OECD, 2013a: 58). While this language evokes the powerful imaginary of AHELO’s integration across diverse education systems, it also underscores the sensitive and often contested implementation of complex education studies in localized contexts.

Second, while capturing the iterative and interpretative nature of the policy implementation process, an organizational discourse approach privileges internal dynamics of compound bureaucracies while only reluctantly engaging with external factors. The organizational account of AHELO’s failure (Harmsen and Braband, 2019), for example, hardly addresses the global environment within which OECD education governance is challenged. Organizational discourse eludes a more comprehensive account of AHELO’s performative role in global knowledge governance and the novel rationalities underpinning global education.

Third, organizational discourse describes the peer review, iterative and agenda-setting behaviour of key actors, departments and committees within the OECD. The process of conceptualizing, developing and implementing education policy on a global scale, however, hints at ideational and theoretical underpinnings not well captured by organizational literature.

Accordingly, my survey of academic literature theorizing global governance turns to human capital theory. A human capital theory approach may reveal the way

foundational orthodoxies empower global education policies while reinforcing neoliberal governance structures sustaining those policies on a global scale.

### **Human capital theory**

The first part of this section explores the theoretical underpinnings of human capital theory with a particular focus on its development in the context of a “global knowledge economy.” The second part reviews how a human capital theory of education informs the OECD’s approach to global education governance. The third part shifts focus to a neoliberal critique of human capital theory before exploring, in the final part, some of the limitations in applying a human capital theory approach to the study of global education.

Human capital “refers to the fact that human beings invest in themselves, by the means of education, training, or other activities, which raises their future income by increasing their lifetime earnings” (Woodhall, 1987: 21). In short, human knowledge and skill have economic value (Schultz, 1961: 3). Defining human capital in this way meant that “techniques of cost benefit analysis and investment appraisal that have been traditionally applied to physical capital” where now applied to social policies including education, health care and migration (Schultz, 1961; Woodhall, 1987: 21-22).

In the 1950s, Theodore Schultz was one of the first economists from the Chicago School to apply the theory of human capital to education, exploring with “forceful and rigorous” scientific method the relationship between education attainment and economic performance (Schultz, 1971). Gary Becker cemented “the foundational narrative of a

linear continuum between education, work, productivity and earnings” (Marginson, 2019) by mathematizing the “rate of return” of educational self-improvement on productivity and earnings (Machlup, 1982: 2).

Why was this “forceful and rigorous” research deemed so essential? In the late 1950s, education attainment was regarded as a prerequisite to the growth of democratic institutions (Acemoglu et al., 2005). Lipset’s modernization theory claimed that “if we cannot say that a ‘high’ level of education is a sufficient condition for democracy the available evidence does suggest that it comes close to being a necessary condition” (Lipset, 1959: 80; quoted in Acemoglu et al., 2005: 44). Education attainment was therefore deemed essential in “promoting political development in general and democracy in particular” (*ibid.*).

The geopolitical context of the early Cold War period saw the OECD’s first application of human capital theory to economic production, innovation and competition. Spurred by the “Sputnik shock” and “the quality of Soviet scientific and technical personnel and of the educational system behind it,” (Papadopoulos, 1994: 23) the creation of the Office for Scientific and Technical Personnel (OSTP) in May 1958 gave the OECD - and the US administration in particular - a mandate to reform western education curricula in favour of investment in natural sciences and mathematics. Papadopoulos observes that the OSTP introduced the first Governing Committee to anchor OECD education work to core policy areas across OECD departments (*ibid.*).<sup>b</sup>

This early application of human capital hinted at the international dimensions of education policy that would be a hallmark of OECD education governance.

By the 1960s human capital growth was considered “the most distinctive feature of the economic system” that accounted for the “productive superiority of the technically advanced countries” (Shultz, 1961: 1-4). While human capital posits that education increases or improves the economic capabilities of people it further theorizes national economic growth as a direct result of investments in education (Sweetland, 1996; Marginson, 2019).<sup>70</sup> Thus, investing in human capital could be regarded as a political project with implications for national and, indeed, global economic growth.

The foundational social science literature on human capital theory discursively and empirically linked education attainment with economic growth and political democratization through the prism of “lifelong learning.” At the centre of this theory was the individual person for whom investment in education would optimize future earnings and contribute to social participation.

In 1962, Fritz Machlup’s groundbreaking *The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States* revealed the contours of a “knowledge economy” hitherto unaccounted for in theories of human capital. Machlup mapped the growth of a postindustrial information society and the “centrality of theoretical knowledge as a source

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<sup>70</sup> This approach found broad institutional support at the World Bank in the years of structural adjustment beginning in the 1980s (Mundy and Verger, 2015). Mundy and Verger (2015) show how human capital theory was specifically applied in the “education for development” agenda first popularized by Robert McNamara, who “emerged as a successful policy entrepreneur, selling the World Bank’s role in promoting poverty reduction” through “highly-concessional financing” for low-income countries (Mundy and Verger, 2015: 11).

of innovation” (Powell and Snellman, 2004: 200). Machlup’s study previewed the way higher education would ultimately shape “postindustrial” knowledge sectors like intellectual property and patents, driving the OECD’s interest in managing this knowledge.

A human capital theory of education underwent a significant shift as neoliberal economic orthodoxy anchored in western nations in the 1970s and 80s. Olssen and Peters (2005: 314) note that neoliberal policy discourse emerged “as a forced response to stagflation and the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of international trade exchange, leading to the abolition of capital controls...giving money and capital the freedom to move across national boundaries.” A commitment to free trade permitted by the abolition of capital controls, the floating of exchange rates, and the abolition of tariffs and subsidies paralleled the reorganization of government under principles of “new” public management (NPM).

The “core dimensions” of NPM include organizational flexibility “through the use of fixed-term] contracts;” clearly defined organizational and personal objectives flowing from a top-down chain of responsibility; and a “results orientation” focusing on the “measurement of and managerial responsibility for achievement” of results (Olssen and Peters, 2005: 322-324).

The influence of neoliberal economic and social ideology extracted and emphasized key features of human capital theory with implications for education and education systems. At the individual (e.g., student) level, neoliberalism emphasized

rational choice, entrepreneurialism and self-sufficiency in the pursuit of tacit knowledge. At the institutional level, moreover, NPM impacted the governance of education systems whereby performance metrics gradually began to contour quality assurance policies with the express purpose of evaluating rates of return on education investment.

The removal of capital controls and other barriers to free trade under neoliberal economic policies further shaped the contours of human capital theory within the burgeoning global knowledge economy.

### ***Human capital theory and the global knowledge economy***

This section describes how human capital theory defines the contours of the global knowledge economy with implications for the OECD's global governance of education. A 1998 White Paper from New Zealand described knowledge economies as

those which are directly based on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information. This is reflected in the trend towards growth in high-technology investments, high-technology industries, more highly-skilled labour and associated productivity gains. Knowledge, as embodied in people (as 'human capital') and in technology, has always been central to economic development. But it is only over the last few years that its relative importance has been recognised, just as that importance is growing (quoted in Peters, 2002: 96).

This policy paper highlights how New Zealand attempted to frame human capital development against the backdrop of a rapidly expanding knowledge economy.

In *The Future of the Global Economy*, the OECD (1999) went further and described the "friction burns and relative decline" (1999: 78) of those countries unwilling

or unable to pursue “common standards, shared codes, and the non-discrimination requirements of a sustainable global knowledge economy” (1999: 109). Singapore exemplified “an economic order based on knowledge, in which the exploitation of natural resources is not only insufficient but, as Singapore demonstrates, not *even necessary*” (1999: 78; italics in original). Because of its “strong education and research infrastructures in some fields,” Singapore was able to “make meaningful choices” in the pursuit of strategic economic policies (OECD, 2004: 162).

Indeed, OECD countries described the rapacious mining of knowledge in ways they would have described mining for other precious resources. A UK White Paper from 1998 suggests that “a knowledge driven economy is one in which the generation and the exploitation of knowledge has come to play the predominant part in the creation of wealth. It is not simply about pushing back the frontiers of knowledge; it is also about the more effective use and exploitation of all types of knowledge in all manner of activity” (quoted in Peters, 2002: 95).<sup>71</sup>

This global policy environment in which knowledge is commodified and exploited “in all manner of activity” puts academic internationalization into context (Ball, 1998; Altbach and Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2007). A human capital theory of education suggests that academic mobility - the cross-border flow of international students, faculty and higher education programs and institutions (Knight, 2004) - has important

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<sup>71</sup> The “frontier” metaphor was used by the OECD when describing the quest for measuring learning gain via AHELO “as when Columbus set sail” (OECD/EDU: 2007/8: 1).



consequences for national knowledge production, innovation and economic growth (Vincent-Lancrin, 2009).<sup>72</sup> “Nowadays, cross-border education also corresponds to short term economic motivations...and as a competitive advantage by the universities” Vincent-Lancrin, 2009: 64). Increasingly, in countries like Canada, student mobility also features into longer-term Economic Class permanent residency immigration programs (e.g., the International Student Program), thus bringing the international dimensions of human capital into national context.

OECD data on international (tertiary) student mobility is captured in *Education at a Glance* publications.<sup>73</sup> These data reveal that international students comprise significant enrolment numbers as a proportion of total tertiary enrolment in European, North American and Oceanic countries (refer to Figure 1) - with Luxembourg (48.6%), Australia (28.4%), New Zealand (20.7%), United Kingdom (18.7%), Switzerland (17.8%), Austria (17.6%), Canada (16.2%), Czech Republic (14.4%), Hungary (12.6%) and Estonia (11.1%) recording the highest proportion of international students among tertiary enrolment in OECD countries in 2019 (OECD, 2021).

Knight and Altbach (2007) contend that internationalization primarily benefits advanced industrialized countries - the principal exporters of science, technology and innovation in higher education. Countries with well-known or well-endowed universities

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<sup>72</sup> The economics of academic mobility, including the aggregate impact on GNP across OECD countries, is beyond the scope of my research. However, future research will draw on my knowledge of Canadian immigration policy to more fully explore this policy area in the Canadian context.

<sup>73</sup> The percentage of international students enrolled as a proportion of total tertiary students in Canada, for example, increased from 10.05% in 2012 to 16.22% in 2019 (OECD, 2021).

attract a lucrative share of the international student market based, in part, on the prestige of their rankings (Marginson, 2007; Moutsios, 2010). Yet, these lofty rankings obscure the fact that many (U.S.) universities struggle to provide intelligible, equitable and transparent admissions information to international students (Taylor, 2018). Surveying “335 four-year public and non-profit private US institutions,” Taylor notes that “only 1 per cent of institutions provide web-embedded translation tools on their websites and 91 per cent of institutions provide English-only content” (Taylor, 2018: 160). The inequity (and colonialism) inherent in English language materials is readily apparent in AHELO. Chapter Five of my dissertation describes how Mexican universities struggled to translate American vernacular found in the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) tool used for the generic skills strand.

It is within this dynamic global education environment that the OECD strives to establish its epistemological governance. While assessment instruments emerge as important quality assurance tools to manage education policies on a global scale, it remains unclear how they are meant to serve an increasingly internationalized student body.

### ***Human capital theory in OECD education***

The launch of the International Adult Literacy Survey (see Table 1.1) in the early 1990s marked the beginning of a comparative education regime that sought evidence-based linkages between education policies and the development of higher order cognitive

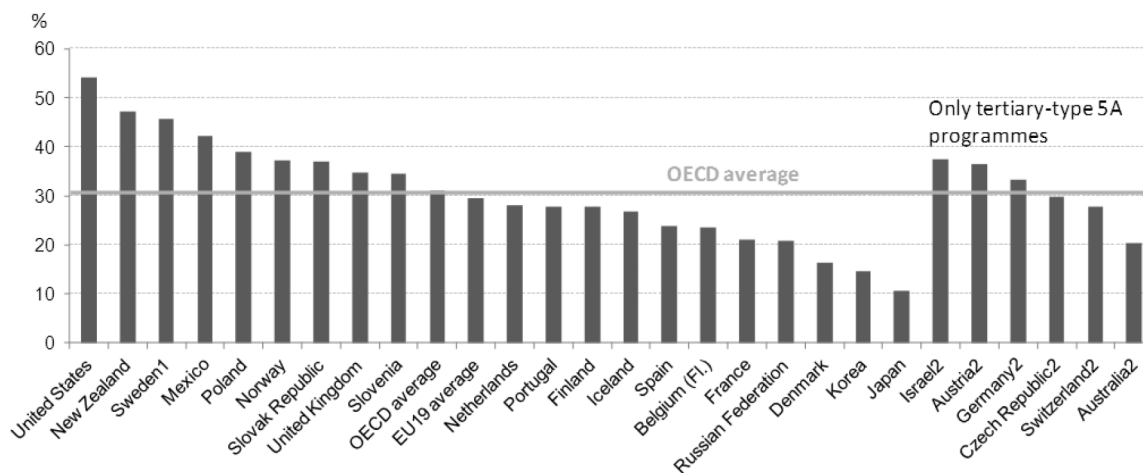
skills; these skills are deemed essential to knowledge production as an essential component of the knowledge-driven economy. A comparative platform allows participating countries and jurisdictions to benchmark their higher education systems, highlighting the peer-review mechanisms behind the governance of such comparative data. Martens and Jakobi (2010) note the early 1990s marked the period in which the OECD shifted its discourse from “lifelong learning” to data management, effectively mirroring the growth of NPM models in public policy.

The OECD thus adapts its methodology over time while maintaining a theoretical orientation toward human capital, effectively expanding the scope of this theory using increasingly sophisticated tools. These tools are designed to capture the complex causal relationship between education policy inputs and economic outcomes. At the same time we see the emergence of a “policy as numbers” approach forming the basis of a comparative indicators program. Finally, with PISA and AHELO we see how the OECD applies its comparative methodology to a growing “family of assessments” across different levels of education governance.

As the OECD’s human capital narrative increasingly seeks to link education policy to economic performance, OECD education policy interest shifts to modes of university governance, academic performance and incentivization, and student choice. These themes in OECD higher education policy form the basis for comparative analysis across (and increasingly beyond) the OECD member states.

OECD comparative data focus on performative aspects of education policy, including “rates of return to schooling” (Botev et al., 2019) and attrition rates as proxies for economic value in knowledge investment. These data on attrition rates (31% OECD average in first cycle higher education programs, as noted in Figure 2.1 below) indicate “the magnitude of non completion, often perceived as a waste of financial and human resources” that underly “failures and inefficiencies in the learning process” (OECD, 2012: 30). Yet these attrition rates also underscore the conceptual and methodological difficulties with which the OECD is able to capture institutional and individual variables related to student learning outcomes.

*Figure 5: Proportion of higher education students who fail to graduate with a primary degree, 2008*



(Source: OECD, 2012: 31).

For the OECD, the problem is thus framed: how do we provide students the data to be more efficient and rational actors in pursuit of higher education? In turn, how do we

provide employers with meaningful data that aligns learning outcomes with labour market requirements?

The OECD posits that “individual incentives to invest in higher education essentially consist of a higher future stream of earnings after graduation,” which reflect “mainly the increases in labour productivity related to higher human capital” (OECD, 2008: 94). The elegant and formulaic approach to human capital theory belies the reservations and obstacles to human capital investment, including (on the supply side) “traditional credit market imperfections related to lenders’ lack of information on students’ abilities and motivation, the uncertainty about their future income and the lack of collateral” (OECD, 2008: 97).

While capital markets fret over their future knowledge workers, students remain uncertain and tentative about how their education will provide employment security:

In addition to market imperfections, incentives arising from the education returns may be blunted because students engaging in higher education are unsure about what kind of final grade they will obtain - or even if they will get that far - as well as the level of salary they will get thereafter. For the individual, this risk may be larger than the average risk to society at large and risk aversion may therefore unduly restrain investment in education. At the same time, students may have exaggerated perceptions of the actual risks involved, also holding back investment (OECD, 2008: 97).

In measuring learning gain, AHELO would theoretically introduce efficiencies in the learning process by creating “assessments that are activators of students’ own learning”

(OECD/AHELO, 2013: 34). The concept of *activating* learning presumes that OECD data streams augment university program or disciplinary content as a kind of “social investment” that promotes investor confidence while appeasing the profound insecurities associated with future employment. The OECD’s higher education policy approach, described as lights in a “policy dashboard” (Vincent-Lancrin, 2018) thus evidences an “inclusive neoliberal” approach that arguably frames its organizational discourse in global education governance (and across other social policy programmes, cf. Mahon, 2011; McBride and Mahon, 2008).<sup>74</sup>

The set of OECD higher education policy prescriptions entail some of the following elements: more equitable access to higher education, e.g., a broader social base, including gender parity; a shorter study period to mitigate attrition rates, minimize student debt, and accelerate students’ entry into the labour market; a tuition regime based on increasing tuition fees balanced with access to loans and grants, thereby minimizing subsidies and reducing the “burden” of public expenditures; and greater “institutional autonomy” whereby universities “decide on the sources and structure of funding (e.g., level of tuition fees), and staff policy (e.g., hiring/firing rules and wage setting)” (OECD, 2008: 99).

In this (reformed) policy environment, the university is “autonomous” by virtue of its ability to reorganize budget/allocation models, implement performance-based metrics,

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<sup>74</sup> To be clear, the OECD does not frame its policies as “inclusive neoliberalism.” This is a concept borrowed from Mahon (2011) to denote how socially inclusive policies are integrated within a neoliberal economic framework.

and incentivize faculty-corporate relations as a way to remain financially viable, competitive and relevant. Within this political economy of higher education, assessment instruments are integrated with quality assurance systems in order to better evaluate the return on education investments.

While human capital theory proposes that students are rational utility maximizers (Olssen and Peters, 2005: 324), its formulaic approach simultaneously requires that universities, as centres of knowledge production, enable a set of policies “activating” students’ own learning. Since its earliest applications to education and knowledge production, human capital theory has therefore entailed redesign and reform of the academic learning environment.

In the 50s and 60s, the theory of human capital, innovation and aggregate national economic progress led to the refocusing of (American) university curricula that emphasized STEM-related knowledge; the geopolitical context of Cold War rivalry was further contoured by modernization theory, which linked education to social and political democratization.

The internationalization of higher education, exemplified most clearly by cross-border student mobility, is a distinct feature of the contemporary global knowledge economy. The OECD frames this mobility as a lucrative opportunity for OECD economies, for universities as they compete for global recognition, and for students searching for return on their academic investment. The publication of *Internationalization and Trade in Higher Education* (OECD, 2004) outlined the policy, institutional and

student rationales for cross-border education. “Most countries,” the OECD concludes, “take a longer-term or broader economic perspective on labour market and research needs and the safeguarding of the higher education sector through the inflow of talent” (OECD, 2004: 101).

While the OECD aptly describes some of the economic rationales driving academic internationalization, does human capital theory adequately capture the global governance of higher education? There is certainly an element of student utility maximization implied in the global university ranking regime within which the AHELO is positioned as a “counterbalance” to the dominant rankings. Prior to assessing the limitations of the human capital approach to the global governance of education, the next section briefly examines a significant body of academic literature critically interrogating the “education neoliberalism” underlying the governing rationality of human capital theory (Peters, 2002; 2017; 2019; Peters and Olssen, 2005; Roberston, 2005; Brown, 2015).

### ***Human capital theory and the education neoliberalism critique***

The “contemporary forms of American neo-liberalism” (Peters, 2002: 92) that emerged from the University of Chicago in the 1950s and 60s linking knowledge to production began to be challenged by social policy literature in the 1980s (Peters, 2002: 92-93). Peters notes how poststructural/postmodern thinkers - including Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard - interrogated the “conceptual relations between ‘knowledge,’ ‘information,’ ‘education,’ and ‘economy’” to arrive at a theory of



knowledge and power informing a more critical and rigorous analysis of the global knowledge economy.

Brown, building from the earlier work of Foucault in this regard, thus conceptualizes neoliberalism as a “social contract turned inside out” (2015: 37-38) governing relations between the apparatus of the state, including its education institutions, and the self:

Moreover, in their newly economized form, neoliberal states will shed as much as possible the cost of developing and reproducing human capital. Thus, they substitute individually debt-financed education for public higher education, personal savings and interminable employment for social security, individually purchased services for public services of all kinds, privately sponsored research for public research and knowledge, fees for use for public infrastructure. Each of these intensifies inequalities and further constrains the liberty of neoliberalized subjects required to procure individually what was once provisioned in common (Brown, 2015: 42).

The point for Brown is that a neoliberal/econometric rationality covers every aspect of human behaviour to the extent that it redraws the “social contract” (Brown, 2015: 18). In the realm of education, the state withdraws from providing quality higher education in favour of tools that manage access to quality higher education (while rewarding entrepreneurial abilities like choice maximization). Stephen Ball notes that “not everyone has an equal stake in the success of the new economic order” (Ball, 1998: 120); indeed, the promise of “choice” implied by human capital theory presupposes access to loans,

credit, and a labour market that assures some “return” on knowledge investment. The “friction burns” metaphor (OECD, 1999) reminds that knowledge societies are variable and uneven: human capital theory pursues an ideal rather than reflecting empirical reality.

Against this rapidly shifting political economy of (global) higher education, Brown (2015: 195) argues that “public-university faculty are poorly positioned, intellectually and organizationally, to fight these trends.” However, the techno-scientific impetus behind neoliberal reform must nevertheless be localized and enacted within domestic political (and academic) structures. Brown’s piercing analysis of education neoliberalism traces the contours of a governing rationality that “disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*. Neoliberalism...formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves” (*ibid.*: 176).

The transformation to education policy and to society at large seems epochal, daunting, and irreversible; however, Brown’s analysis is nonetheless dispirited and fails to furnish us with analytical tools to understand points or avenues of resistance to education neoliberalism. To wit, Brown (2015: 18; 38) points to the “hollowing out” of the “liberal democratic social contract” and the “imperilling of more radical democratic imaginaries,” but she offers no qualitative assessment of how this social contract could perhaps be reimagined by leveraging the data tools, including AHELO, that are endemic within the quality assurance environment. Could comparative learning outcome models instead

channel critical thinking and higher-order reasoning into social structures supportive of liberal democratic principles?

If AHELO indeed represents a neoliberal technique of governance - as my dissertation certainly argues - then it also triggers important sites of resistance to such a sweeping techno-scientific paradigm. This is exemplified by student (non)participation, faculty protest, and in the malfunctioning of quality assurance and data management tools required for implementation. The mobilization of university associations - in particular the American Council for Education and Universities Canada - in response to AHELO's amended project design in April 2015 further signals an organized and well-informed body of education professionals well-positioned, both organizationally and intellectually, to fight education neoliberalism.

Education neoliberalism - an essential/contested discourse in the education field - may be global in scope and transnationalized through OECD education policy, but it simultaneously engenders localized resistance, opposition, and opportunities for counter-discourses and disruptions to implementation.

### ***Limitations to human capital theory***

As an approach to understanding global education governance, human capital theory can be considered *sine qua non* of education neoliberalism and, arguably, a defining feature of the global education governance landscape. As such, there is some utility to this approach in situating ideological (op)positions within the global education policy field. Further, its formulaic approach to education also draws a link between

human capital theory and the rise of policy as numbers, a defining feature of the governance “fields” approach considered below.

A neoliberal reading of *homo oeconomicus* reveals an important tension in human capital theory. While education doubtless improves the human condition, in some socio-economic contexts it can be just as rational to *not* pursue additional education, or to pursue *suboptimal* education because of “liquidity constraints,” e.g., the “poverty trap” (Barham et al. 1995). This example extends to international students who pursue post-secondary studies in Canada. International students may choose to invest in a Canadian credential in order to improve lifetime earnings, but personal finances and limited access to scholarships, bursaries and other grants may limit “choices” to private career colleges that have no clear pathway to post-graduate employment in Canada (or abroad).

Marginson (2019: 289-291) criticizes human capital theory as “a single and universal lens” better understood as “a widely understood *metaphor* for relations between work and education [italics added]” rather than a falsifiable theory because the theory actually fails to distinguish causality among a vast array of independent variables that are correlative at best. So while the OECD attempts to “modify” its human capital orthodoxy, e.g., in a manner reminiscent of *Jobs*, the range of social variables impacting institutional quality are too vast to contain within a linear and overly deterministic formula.

That a difficult or challenging education experience would be reduced to a failure or inefficiency in the learning process is characteristic of the human capital narrative. Yet data on attrition rates - ostensibly pointing to failures in the learning process - may

instead point to variables not well captured by econometric data; namely, the wider social and cultural variables impacting student learning. The global pandemic unleashed by the Covid-19 virus brought into sharp relief the many external factors impacting student performance, university learning, and labour market projections.

The single lens of human capital theory - in which “the researcher applies a fixed theoretical framework and linked methodology to a succession of empirical observations in different sites” - obscures “the use of many other lenses” with which to approach and understand the many complex variables that impact education outcomes (*ibid*, 291).

Human capital theory is fundamentally oriented toward an individual rational utility maximization logic (methodological individualism) that eludes the broader structures of global education governance.

At the aggregate level, economic policies in OECD countries may reflect elements of human capital (e.g., Economic Class permanent residency programs). However, the theory contains problems and contradictions when scaling from the national to the supranational level, and its ability to explain global education is limited. Ideological narratives simply do not capture the dynamics of global education policy.

Garritzmann (2016), for example, researched the path dependencies of tuition and subsidy regimes across the OECD and found that politics - more precisely the duration of political parties in office - is an accurate predictor of change in higher education finance policy. National political economies, as Garritzmann shows, are variable and structure

their education systems in complex ways. Approaches emphasizing ideology do not therefore capture the range of variables affecting policy continuity and change.

### **International Relations, Global Political Economy and Global Governance**

Organizational discourse and human capital theories offer approaches that foreground operational, bureaucratic and ideational foundations explaining AHELO within the context of global education governance.

This section of my theoretical enquiry delves into approaches in international relations (IR), global political economy (GPE), and global governance in order provide additional insight into the inter-state, transnational, and governance networks that map the circulation of global education within world politics. This approach helps to theorize the role of states in this process while revealing additional multi-scalar (Lingard and Rawolle, 2011) and poly-centric (Koenig-Archibugi, 2010) sources of authority.

The types of non-state sources of authority brought into analytical focus include private/technical/epistemic actors involved in these transnational processes. My treatment of IR theory considers “education multilateralism” as an example of the liberal institutionalism characterizing inter-state relations; my treatment of GPE focuses on the transnational networks that reflect key aspects of the political economy of global higher education; and my review of governance literature centres on the relational and competitive aspects of authority theorized to shape education governance “architectures” (Biermann et al., 2009; Zürn, 2017; Pouliot, 2020).

This section thus provides an important theoretical bridge between OECD neoliberal orthodoxy and emerging structures of political authority in which AHELO (and AHELO-like tools) is embedded. These governance structures, which my dissertation theorizes in terms of “fields,” informs my primary theoretical contribution to the academic literature on global education governance. I describe my approach to education fields in the final section of this chapter.

***International relations (IR) and global education governance***

Historically, theories of IR have been principally concerned with understanding the conduct of states within the structure of the inter-state system. This system imposes a structure defined by territorial boundaries and national interests of all kinds where the absence of a central locus of authority, or hegemonic power, produces what theorists in the Realist tradition of IR theory call anarchy (Mearsheimer, 1994).

Achieving stability, order and peace among nations with competing interests is an important function of intergovernmental organizations. Some IOs, including the OECD, are concerned with optimizing international cooperation within this anarchic world order through economic and social policies that foster cooperation. Theorists from a liberal institutionalist tradition, then, propose that membership in IOs permit rational states to expand their ideas of self-interest to include co-operation even in the absence of centralized authority (Ruggie, 1992; Hansenclever, 2000; Hobson, 2000).

According to a third dominant approach in IR theory, such inter-state cooperation is premised on shared economic values and normative democratic principles, or what

theorists in the Constructivist tradition refer to as “the importance of identity in shaping political action” (Reus-Smit, 2001: 209). By focusing on the performative role of identities in political processes, Broom (2013: 193) observes that “constructivist approaches to the study of non-material factors can be differentiated from both positivist rational actor models that privilege material variables, as well as from ‘soft’ rationalist approaches.”

In this way, the OECD constructs authority through the definition of shared tasks or goals (education quality); through the definition of categories of actors (member states, technical experts, and stakeholders); and through the creation of achievable, noble, and/or necessary interests for actors including developing standards and regimes in education policy and practice (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999).

While education has principally remained a closely guarded national policy domain, neoliberal economic policies coupled with the globalization of trade and services throughout the 80s and 90s has rendered education policy an increasingly borderless domain. Space has opened for the provision of education services by a host of non-state actors competing for authority in the global governance of educational policies and practices. And while education remains closely linked to (national) human capital - e.g., “brain drain” and policies to encourage/mitigate knowledge migration (cf. OECD, 2004: 277) - states struggle to contextualize the economic implications of globalized education.

From a rational-choice/institutionalist perspective, the OECD therefore reduces the information and transaction costs for states and to increase the level of transparency



required for their cooperation (Hasenclever, 2000: 7-8; Hobson, 2000: 8). In the context of a global knowledge economy, high information and transaction costs can be sharply reduced through peer-reviewed best practices that guide policy-making: states implement OECD education policies because the data is objective, analytical, impartial, and implementation leads to optimal outcomes in education policy. A rational choice perspective on liberal institutions may be usefully coupled to a constructivist theoretical approach that emphasize the interplay of data, governance, and values (Mundy and Verger, 2015).

### ***Education multilateralism***

A key contribution from the liberal institutionalist literature is the concept of education multilateralism. John Ruggie (1992: 571) defined multilateralism as “an institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct.” The intergovernmental organization (IO) is the institutional structure through which countries deploy governmental, institutional and financial resources undergirded by shared norms. Intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations and World Bank are exemplary of education multilateralism.

The UN, for example, will declare global education goals under the umbrella of initiatives like the Millennium Development/Sustainable Development Goals and Education for All. Within this overarching set of policy goals, the UN thus encourages nations to work multilaterally in promoting sustainable education projects through the World Bank/International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). The Bank/

IBRD will provide funding and policy direction in low- and middle-income countries in pursuit of lifelong learning, poverty reduction, greater access to technology, and gender-based education initiatives consistent with goals established through the UN.<sup>75</sup>

Beyond the work of the UN and World Bank/IBRD, however, there are important conceptual difficulties in approaching global education through the analytical lens of education multilateralism.

### *Limitations of the IR approach*

First, multilateralism is state-centric. Although it indeed represents member states, the OECD can be aptly described as a “compound bureaucracy” (Trondal et al., 2013; Harmsen and Braband, 2019) with complementary as well as competing elements within its bureaucratic structure. Efforts in global education thus follow a different governance model and pursue a different audience than state-led multilateral projects evidenced by the UN.

Although the OECD will often support the World Bank to achieve UN education goals, its approach to education policy rather emphasizes best practices in specific (thematic) areas corresponding to overarching economic policy development. In principle, the OECD pursues an education agenda for economic rather than social policy objectives. The OECD’s work in higher education moreover typically favours regional initiatives, including Bologna and the EHEA, which link education to labour market policies.

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<sup>75</sup> The UN’s 17 sustainable development goals can be found here: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

Second, multilateralism fails to consider sub-national and non-state sources of authority - pointing to what Grande and Pauly (2005) refer to as “complex sovereignty.” The standard-setting/benchmarking dimensions of cross-national education studies like PISA and AHELO bring into relief transnational networks that emphasize multilevel governance structures (Coleman 2012). Within transnational education studies, for example, countries will nominate technical and subject matter experts to further inform coherent policy making - bringing “education multilateralism” conceptually closer to multi-scalar and poly-centric governance.

Third, while a multilateral perspective obscures the role of private/non-state actors in global education, it also presupposes a cohesive liberal identity underpinning shared norms. China’s PISA performance in 2012 and 2018 highlights the way global education governance may undercut the shared norms underpinning a liberal multilateral framework. As noted further above (see page 73), Schleicher’s comments highlight the way epistemic authority (Zürn, 2018), and education data more specifically, may exercise influence and stand in as authority in political discourse.

This “policy as numbers” discourse identified in education policy literature (Grek, 2009; Rizvi and Lingard, 2009; Ball, 2015; Sellar, 2015;) thus challenges a liberal institutionalist approach to education multilateralism, effectively redefining a political terrain through which data and comparative indicators form the basis for multi-scalar cooperation in global education.

Fourth and finally, the rational choice underpinnings of liberal institutionalism presuppose stable sources of (uncontested) authority. That is, the authority of actors and their relative functions in IR are assigned a priori to their enactment, or performance, in novel structures of governance (Sending, 2015). Even constructivist approaches that consider the interaction of material and semiotic representations in the formation of political identities affix stable properties to those representations, rarely interrogating how they came to be authoritative within their respective (policy) domains.

For each of these reasons it becomes imperative to investigate alternative perspectives from Political Science in order to explain global education governance. The third section of my literature review considers theoretical contributions from the global political economy literature (GPE) with a focus on transnational policy networks.

### ***Global political economy and education governance***

A GPE approach sheds additional light on how inequalities in power relations among states and regions interact with global education governance. A political economy perspective is instrumental to my study because it focuses on the university as a primary unit of analysis. A GPE approach is therefore useful for considering how universities enact novel networks in the global production of knowledge-as-capital. This approach reveals new actors (e.g, quality assurance regimes) and technologies (rankings and indicators) comprising knowledge networks in global education governance. The OECD's discourse on human capital and rates of return on university education are instrumental in situating some of the dynamics of higher education political economy explored in this

section. Academic research points to the corporate restructuring of university governance boards (Slaughter and Rhoades, 1996; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Slaughter et al., 2014; Carroll and Beaton, 2000) as a key example of the quality assurance environment driving university reform in the direction of “academic capitalism.”

*Academic capitalism in transnational education*

The shifting composition of university boards has been key to understanding epochal changes to the governance, management and strategic vision of Canadian (Carroll and Beaton, 2000) and American (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997) universities. University boards draw increasingly on trustees from business and financial sectors to provide strategic direction on research priorities, to fund university programs and institutes, and to connect students with industry through scholarships, fellowships, and other grants. University senior management are “key actors and leaders in these efforts” to transform universities-as-firms (Slaughter et al., 2014: 2).

For Carroll and Beaton (2000: 71), “universities are becoming key ancillaries of production” through the “cross-membership between university boards of governors and corporate boards of directors.” The argument in this analysis of Canadian higher education political economy is that universities are designated as sites of knowledge production (research, development and training) and “credentialed labour-power” in the service of global capital (ibid., 72).

Between 1997-2005, Slaughter et al. observe the percentage of total ties between universities and patenting corporations grew from 5.6% to 26.6%, evidencing a growth in

interlock patterns between the corporate and academic sectors (2014: 3). A principal area of concern emerging from this literature is the conflicting interests introduced by interlocking directorates. Trustees drawn from the world of business, industry or corporate finance may play a role in university strategy and governance, thereby increasing the potential for institutional conflicts of interest (ICOI).

ICOI “refers to situations in which research, teaching, or service are compromised, or appear to be compromised, due to external financial or business relationships held at the institutional level by trustees or senior executives” (*ibid.*). The analysis focuses on patenting and the potential ICOI arising from strategic decisions related to investment in research from corporate sponsors. “The potential [for conflict] arises because trustees, who have the power to make strategic decisions, could prefer corporate rather than university or public interests” (*ibid.*).

These trustees, and the academic-corporate interlocks they constitute, are increasingly visible in global education governance. With the rise of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in global education these actors include “transnationally configured profit firms, philanthropists, NGOs and religious organizations” (Robertson et al., 2012: 1). The Lumina Foundation for Education, a US-based corporation with \$1.4 billion in assets, was one of six foundations to provide 13% of AHELO’s total project cost for the feasibility study (OECD, 2012: 83). Like the participating countries, Lumina was also keen to learn what proof of concept could be obtained by the OECD’s innovative project in global education.

One of Lumina's main initiatives is a performance-based learning outcomes policy model that "funds institutions based on how well they do at ensuring students make academic progress from year to year and on year-over-year increases in the numbers of graduates. By focusing on - and funding - student success, public institutions can contribute to national increases in educational attainment." The language of human capital theory resonates in Lumina's funding model. Moreover, its approach aims to uncover institutional strengths and weakness and to direct public funding according to institutional performance.

The OECD has hinted at the struggle to balance the competing objectives of universities within a knowledge- and capital-driven global economic environment:

There is a tension between the pursuit of knowledge generation as a self-determined institutional objective and the statement of national priority as defined in the aims and goals of the tertiary system. The objective, from a governance point of view, is then to reconcile the priorities of the individual institutions and the broader social and economic objectives of countries. This entails determining how far the former contributes to the latter as well as clarifying the degree of latitude the institution has in pursuing its own self-established objectives (OECD, 2008: 17).

For some university administrators, the reductionist approach to education raises important concerns about the mission and values of the university: "Universities are at the centre of knowledge production, of dissemination of knowledge and of transfer of knowledge into innovation," acknowledged the Chairman of the Board of Lund

University in Sweden to the OECD in 2006. “However,” he continues, “we, as members of governing bodies, have to be careful in stretching the parallels with business too far. We have to identify the unique role of a university governing body” (OECD/IMHE: 2006).

Given the attention on the importance of STEM-related disciplines in national and, increasingly, global competitiveness, it is perhaps no surprise that nine out of 10 Ontario universities with civil engineering programs - “representing approximately 61% of all Canadian civil engineering graduating students” - participated in AHELO (Lennon and Jonker, 2014). A cross-national regime of higher education learning outcomes would offer an additional accreditation platform for academic-industry collaborations, thus deepening channels of knowledge capitalism among and between education political economies across the OECD.

Quality assurance regimes constitute an important element of the higher education policy framework guiding OECD countries. Martin (2007) observes that an estimated half of the universities in the world have instituted some form of quality assurance regime in order to “undertake the classic regulatory functions of setting standards, monitoring activities, and applying enforcement to secure behaviour modification where this is required” (King, 2007: 413).

As Porter and Webb illustrate in their case study of OECD knowledge networks, the OECD increasingly weighs in on corporate governance. AHELO brings into relief the OECD’s role in shaping university corporate governance in two important ways: First, by



providing data, analysis and policy guidance supporting quality assurance regimes in higher education; and second, by activating and sustaining transnational knowledge networks in order to diffuse these quality assurance policies, principles and practices on a global scale.

Increasingly, performance- and surveillance-based metrics regulate and assess university governance systems throughout the world. As Jarvis (2014: 156) maintains: “the emergence of normative and now dominant regulatory instruments situated around reporting, transparency, accountability, performance and audit cultures, and the increasing subjugation of the academy to regimes of assessment based on metrics that are driven by quasi-market like competition, act increasingly as a means for regimenting academic and institutional compliance.” Comparative learning outcome instruments are constitutive of this quality assurance landscape informing the increasingly global governance over higher education.

The role of higher education quality assurance agencies points to new patterns and circulations of authority in the global governance of education. Although they have been studied theoretically in the context of higher education management and transformation (e.g., Jarvis, 2014), quality assurance regimes remain understudied empirically within global education governance. Pushback against their implementation in academic settings may account for the resistance to learning outcome instruments like AHELO -

evidencing, too, the struggles over a “legitimate” order (Weber, 1947) in global education governance.<sup>76</sup>

The ways in which the OECD encourages the convergence of quality assurance regimes through transnational networks is an empirical question answered, in part, through my case studies in chapter four.

### ***Limitations of the GPE approach***

Academic-corporate-government collaborations of the types described above are theorized to operate in the service of global capital. Carroll and Beaton’s empirical research into interlocking academic-corporate boards in Canada helps to theorize the social organization of global capital, but it presupposes that global capital presents a unified class with few diverging interests. Such an empirical analysis may falter when applied to non-OECD countries where AHELO-like tools are theorized to play a role in bridging universities with emerging knowledge industries. That is, capital growth may be a more distant policy objective mediated by more immediate needs associated with implementing an initial quality assurance policy framework (e.g., Mexico and Egypt).

Canada and the United States are principal players in OECD education and so Slaughter et al.’s quantitative analysis of interlocking directorates in the US context is especially instructive in offering a more comprehensive description of the North American higher education political economy. Faced with sweeping budgetary reforms

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<sup>76</sup> The following section more fully explores the concepts of legitimacy and authority in global governance.

and reductions in the allocation of funds, university administrators are compelled to seek partnerships with government and private sector entities, entailing a shift in university strategy toward research in applied science and technology and promises of lucrative joint ventures.

Though it is clear that universities are emerging as critically important actors in global education governance, prevailing GPE approaches tend to privilege the role of global capital in sustaining these dynamic transnational networks to the exclusion of other actors. While intuitive for mapping how academic-corporate interlocks facilitate a transnational class, a political economy approach overlooks the technical experts and epistemic actors who develop and manage data tools that sustain novel structures of knowledge governance.

Approaches from education sociology interrogate academic-corporate linkages between the OECD and the developing world, anchoring neo-colonial theoretical approaches to novel circulations of power in education via PISA and AHELO. Riyadh Shahjahan argues the OECD is an “imperial agent in higher education policy today” (2013: 677). For Shahjahan and other scholars in the post-colonial tradition (e.g., Rhee 2009; Sidhu 2006; Appadurai 2001), the OECD perpetuates “coloniality”<sup>77</sup> in global higher education by creating a “global space for equivalence” where assessment tools “[perpetuate] Eurocentrism in policy analysis” (Shahjahan 2013: 677).

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<sup>77</sup> “Coloniality” draws our attention to the historical-material conditions that permit certain knowledges to attain authority in global policy design by virtue of their social privilege. (See Delgado and Romero 2000; Mignolo 2000, 2005 in Shahjahan 2013).

There is some truth to these claims of Eurocentrism, for AHELO's methodology, *Tuning*, - explored in Chapter 3 - is borrowed from the EHEA context and applied to culturally diverse contexts. However, critiques to numerical governance founded on theories of coloniality do not stand up well to empirical scrutiny: the effects of these governance tools are indeed complex and resistant to grand theoretical narratives drawing on classical narratives of imperial/subject inequality. What we see in AHELO's implementation in Egypt, for instance, is a study that became celebrated as an avenue and process through which Egyptian students celebrated a break from authoritarian rule and joined a globalized academic community orchestrated by the OECD.<sup>78</sup>

However, the role of universities in (re)producing structures of global capital linking centres of knowledge production in advanced economies introduces a more plausible neo-colonial critique of AHELO. When harnessed to global capital interests through transnational knowledge networks, AHELO may become a tool that integrates future knowledge workers into global capitalist networks.

### ***Global governance approaches to education policy***

IR theories help explain how global politics and inter-state relations structure global education. Approaches grounded to GPE shed light on how education may (re)produce relations of power and inequality in the global economy. The global governance literatures situate multi-scalar and polycentric sources of authority informing global education. In contrast to state-centric perspectives, a governance approach

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<sup>78</sup> Egypt's experience with AHELO is documented in Chapter 4.

considers a broader range of non-state actors in the development and implementation of global education and the mechanisms underlying this governance.

***Expert governance in global education***

In the late 90s, scholarly attention in the burgeoning global governance literature began to recognize the role of private authority in shaping power in world politics. As Cutler et al. argue, private sector actors influence and, increasingly, *manage* different issue areas in global governance, “establishing norms, rules, and institutions that guide the behaviour of the participants...” (Cutler et al., 1999: 4). Expertise and “epistemic” authority (Zürn, 2017; Tallberg and Zürn, 2019) are therefore theorized to shape national policy behaviour. Even so, Pouliot (2020) persuasively argues that state authorities will not accept this authority *de facto*; political calculation, civil society organizations and a host of variables influence ability of expertise to shape politics.

Principally, expertise and expert authority are depicted in the policy literatures as safeguards against political miscalculation, misinformation, or as sherpas to sources of “best practices” (Chen, 2014). Expert/epistemic governance in global education compels us to consider how authority in global education policy is relocated from the state and toward technical experts operating at the supra- and sub-national levels. Of relevance to the study of global education governance, how does expert knowledge accommodate academic stakeholders with substantial powers to steer global education projects?

The growth in technical authority in global education, revealed through the proliferation of international large-scale assessment instruments (ILSAs) and their use in

national policy settings, points to a significant shift in how authority is delegated in novel transnational policy environments. The OECD is widely perceived to be a leader in global education, but it is often the technical experts that bridge OECD policy recommendations to national level policy implementation. In this way, technical experts act as knowledge brokers in OECD education work, going beyond validating the technological feasibility of the project to managing how data is interpreted and managed by participating institutions and countries.

While there is ample empirical evidence of expert governance networks in education operating in the European context, little empirical evidence exists outside the eurozone. Beginning in the 1990s, expertise networks and “strategic alliances” across the eurozone carved a “methodology of networked e-learning for joint research, information and training” between 40 universities, companies and “learning organisations” (OECD, 1999: 128). These initiatives culminated in the Bologna Declaration, which sought program and degree parity across European universities as a way to link higher education to a competitive eurozone.

Writing in 2009 as AHELO was taking shape, Moutsios clearly envisioned expert authority as a dominant mode of *global* education governance: “Educational technology, school management, higher education, adult education, lifelong learning, and numerous other areas, even pre-school education, have come under the scrutiny of OECD’s contracted research and consultancy networks, signifying an impressive expansion of role and scope in the area of education policy making internationally” (Moutsios, 2009: 459).

***Authority and legitimacy in global governance***

The global governance literature is especially useful for considering questions of authority and legitimacy underlying novel epistemic structures in which experts, universities, and the OECD itself shapes the global education policy field. The OECD is a major player in the global governance of education. The academic literature recognizes that intergovernmental organizations like the OECD influence world politics often autonomously of the states that constitute its organization (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; 2004). Though, as expressed by Harmsen and Braband (2019: 4), this “almost reified dichotomy of ‘state interest’ versus ‘organizational autonomy’ present in much of the literature” belies the “complex, iterative relationships in which influence flows in both directions in terms best conceived as a dialogue that further involves wider policy communities.”

The idea of *dialogue* underscores the importance placed on “soft” mechanisms of governance spanning supra-, national and sub-national actors and institutions. It is increasingly obvious in the literature, moreover, that such mechanisms require a degree of legitimacy in the absence of which leaves the authority of IOs in question. The governance literature is therefore attuned to role of shared norms and *forms* and *sources* of legitimacy underlying these mechanisms (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019). The OECD shapes global policy through appeals to “soft law” rather than through formal legal mechanisms - pointing us in the direction of the OECD’s “cognitive” and “normative” sources of

governance (McBride and Mahon, 2008; Woodward, 2009) that seek to ascertain legitimacy and authority in world politics.

The OECD's "cognitive" governance instills a "sense of identity and community amongst its members by engineering and propagating a set of values, perspectives, expectations and discourses about their place and that of the organization in the global polity" (Woodward, 2009: 63). Woodward observes that the OECD's pre-eminence in global governance is explained partly by its ability to "grease the wheels" (Woodward, 2009: 8) through peer review processes that structure a "normative" governance via regular interactions between the organization and representatives from OECD member states. Indeed, acting as the forum through which national policies are negotiated at the global level is a hallmark of the legitimacy of IOs (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019: 582).

Closely connected to the concept of cognitive-normative governance is the idea of "pragmatic legitimacy" (Suchman, 1995) that identifies the OECD as the appropriate IO in which to propose policy solutions to complex problems. Following Suchman, a pragmatic form of legitimacy is one in which policy audiences *believe* the OECD is the most capable entity of carrying out the particular activities within that policy domain. This shared belief in the OECD's epistemic authority "cuts across conventional state and public/private boundaries" (Porter and Webb, 2008: 53). A key finding from Porter and Webb is that state actors seldom engage in rational bargaining over novel principles of corporate (e.g., education) governance - relying, instead, on a shared identity over what Max Weber would consider a legitimate order (Weber, 1947: 124).



Importantly, such shared identity coalesces legitimacy even when “there may exist at the same time different interpretations of the meaning of the order” (Weber: 125). This observation about legitimacy and authority is crucial in a compound bureaucracy (Tondal et. al, 2013) that shapes global public policy by appealing to common norms and shared governance while simultaneously evidencing a struggle to convene internal/external authority for its innovative work. What the literature describes as an “authority-legitimacy gap” (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019: 583) may lead to the “fragmentation” of governance architectures (Biermann et al., 2009). This fragmentation is especially evident in studies of global education governance.

### ***The authority-legitimacy gap in global governance***

Though the concept of legitimacy in global governance has gained increased attention since the early 2000s (Biermann et al., 2009), only recently has governance scholarship enquired more precisely into *how* IOs “gain, sustain and lose legitimacy in world politics” (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019: 581; Pouliot, 2020). Is the claim to technical or epistemic authority sufficient for IOs to obtain and maintain legitimacy in world politics and global public policy? Can claims to legitimacy made by IOs be sustained solely on the basis of shared identity and norms - what Suchman (1995) refers to as their “moral legitimacy”?

Arguably, no.

The global university rankings regime underscores the “authority-legitimacy gap” (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019: 583) in education governance and in the OECD’s authority

more specifically. This gap may account for policy failure in global education governance. The cluster of influential rankings presents a challenge to the OECD's "epistemological" governance (Sellar and Lingard, 2014) in global education. This mode of governance accounts for how country-level data, comparative indicators, and education policy analysis structure national decision making in line with the OECD's own world view.

There is a moral suasion accenting the OECD's epistemological governance, for the OECD considers existing rankings opaque, distortional and prejudicial in favour of large, prestigious research universities (OECD/AHELO, 2013b: 32) that undercut the potential value of smaller, less renowned institutions. Richard Yelland of the Directorate for Education, who led the policy development of AHELO at the OECD, opined that "higher education is notoriously internationalized. One of the things that was going on in parallel to the development of AHELO, and in fact gave some impetus to it I think, was the university rankings. Certainly some of the supporters of AHELO saw it as in some part a counterbalance to the reliance on international rankings which were themselves skewed toward research-intensive universities" (interview, OECD/EDU: March 13, 2013).

The advantages accruing to research-intensive universities, however, obscured problematic "political and strategic decisions" associated with poor methodologies:

the international rankings that are currently available – for all the care that goes into compiling them – fall far short of capturing the range and depth of what universities and other higher education institutions do. Accountability and transparency are essential and rankings have a valuable contribution to make. However when tools intended to provide information for students and their families are used to drive political and strategic decisions we have a problem. This is a zero-sum game: there will only ever be 100 universities in the “top” 100. Rankings may be inconvenient, but they will not go away. They are not a disease, they are a symptom: a symptom of a lack of accountability and transparency which needs to be treated (OECD, 2011).<sup>79</sup>

Hazelkorn (2018: 5-6) points to how a “notoriously internationalized” education governance environment may be fragmented by university rankings: “there are over 150 different national and specialist rankings, and almost 20 global rankings - albeit only three ([the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities], [the Times Higher Education] and [Quacquarelli Symonds]) are referenced regularly.”

In Sending’s (2015) analysis competition is deemed essential to promoting a super-ordinate field position, deploying important social capital in the recognition of actor legitimacy within the governance field. How do actors at different governance scales thus compete for authority in this global education policy field?

At the supra-national level, AHELO counterbalances competing university rankings by appealing to an epistemological governance anchored to robust data and

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<sup>79</sup> <https://community.oecd.org/community/educationtoday/blog/2011/05/16/rankings-are-not-a-disease-they-are-a-symptom>

evidence-based higher education management tools. Further, higher education rankings reflect what Erkkilä and Piironen (2018) term a “deep structuration” in global governance. Rankings are thus imbricated with other indicators - including innovation, competitiveness and good governance - in a way that makes rankings alone insufficient to orient policy makers in an increasingly competitive and innovative global environment (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018: 2).

The table below situates AHELO in the global regime of indicators and rankings across the four closely-related policy fields identified by Erkkilä and Piironen.

*Table 3: AHELO in the global knowledge architecture*

Field	1990	2000	2010
<i>Good governance</i>	Corruption Perception Index (1995); Worldwide Governance Indicators (1996)	Fringe Special (2001); Press Freedom Index (2002); UN e-Government Readiness/Development Index (2003); Global Integrity Report (2006);	Implementation Assessment Tool (IAT) (2011); Global Integrity Report (2010)
<i>Competitiveness</i>		Open Budget Index (2006); Open Net Initiative (2007); Actionable Governance Indicators (2008); Government at a Glance (2009); Global Business Competitiveness Index (2000)	EU Regional Competitiveness Index (2010); Hot Spots 2025 (2013); Competitiveness of Cities (2014)

<i>Higher education</i>	Education at a Glance, OECD (1998)	Academic Ranking of World Universities (2003); QS World University Rankings (2004); Times Higher Education Supplement (2004); Webometrics Ranking of World Universities (2004); Affordability and Accessibility Comparison of Global Higher Education Rankings (2005); Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities (2007); The Leiden Ranking (2008); the SCImago Institutions Ranking (2009)	QS World University Rankings - by subject (2011); Times Higher Education - Thomson Reuters (2010); High Impact Universities (2010); the U-Multirank (2011); <b>AHELO</b> (2012); US News and World Report Best Global University Rankings (2013)
<i>Innovation</i>		European Innovation Scorecard (2001); Global Innovation 1000 (2005); Global Innovation Index (2007); Innovation Cities Index (2007); Innovation Union Scoreboard (2008); International Innovation Index (2009)	The Bloomberg Innovation Index (2011); The Startup Ecosystem Report (2012); Thomson Reuters Top 100 Global Innovators (2011); The Global Cleantech Innovation Index (2012); Top 100 Innovative Universities (2015); Top 25 Global Innovators - Government (2016)

(Source: Erkilli and Piironen, 2018: 86-87).

At the national level, global rankings play an increasingly *prescriptive* role in the “imaginaries of reputation” (Collins and Park, 2016) guiding the behaviour of institutions as well as nations - delimiting, in effect, a novel kind of geopolitical competition to assert primacy in the global knowledge economy (Hazelkorn, 2018). Jarvis (2014: 157) notes there is an increased awareness that university knowledge plays a direct role in national economic growth and knowledge-based competition between countries. The increased student mobility and global benchmarking obtained through rankings prompts “commensurate national policy responses” to meet the competitive demand of this internationalized environment (Jarvis, 2014: 157; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997: 36-40).

But these rankings can also produce more nefarious patterns of behaviour with implications for global education policies. Kehm documents how universities are “buying the reputation of researchers in order to increase their own reputation.” In the race to the rankings, institutions will pay “highly cited research stars” annual salaries in exchange for “[indicating] in all their publications their affiliation to the respective” university; while in other universities, lucrative new managerial positions are created with the express purpose of maximizing institutions’ ranking positions (Kehm, 2020: 93).

These are some of the ways that rankings may permit a slip from “imaginaries of reputation” (Collins and Park, 2016) to “innovation in manipulation” leading to “radically new forms of academic fraud and misconduct” (Biagioli and Lippman, 2020: 2). The governance literature thus alerts our attention to the *performative* aspects of tools like AHELO, which are intended to counterbalance alternative epistemic claims to education

governance. In claiming pragmatic legitimacy, the OECD/AHELO “competes” for recognition in an increasingly fragmented global governance “architecture” (Biermann et al., 2009).

Convening authority in global governance relies on executing technical proofs that seek to bridge the “authority-legitimacy gap.” The OECD has staked an important claim in the global education policy field by obtaining a proof of concept for AHELO (OECD, 2013b); yet crises of legitimacy in AHELO’s technical design, governance, and policy implementation bring the authority-legitimacy gap theorized in the governance literature into sharp relief. Chapters three and four of my study bring this gap into empirical view.

### ***Limitations of the governance literature***

While the governance literature goes further than any (in this study) toward theorizing global education governance, a dearth of empirical evidence forestalls greater analytical insight into the competition for recognition of authority that characterizes the global education policy field. The authority-legitimacy gap adds an important theoretical contribution to understanding the stability of authority in global governance structures. This gap primarily addresses the ability of IOs to retain the legitimacy conferred by member states who, by virtue of their membership, confer authority on IOs to shape global policy. However, the literature eludes the authority-legitimacy gap exacerbated by other important actors in global education, including technical experts who design global

studies and the university actors who implement them. Empirical attention to these trans- and sub-national actors provide a more robust account of global education governance.

The “meditative” activities and “inquisitive” processes (McBride and Mahon, 2008) underlying cognitive and normative forms of governance, respectively, clearly work hand-in-glove in the construction of global education governance. Yet these mechanisms are far from clearly defined or free of contestation. Prevailing theories in IR/global public policy literatures tend to assign the OECD a “hegemonic” role in global education due, in part, to the ubiquity of these structures and their *capacity* for global policy convergence (Rubenson, 2008).

These categorizations and descriptions of governance largely assume authority into the analysis. The very idea of cognitive governance - that an overarching set of values and ideals prescribes actor behaviour - belies the fact of divergent capital and economic interests among competing contractors and experts. Moreover, the pragmatic legitimacy claimed by the OECD by virtue of its epistemological governance comes into tension when applied to the institutional level, as the Mexican and Egyptian university experiences in the AHELO feasibility study reveal. Transnational knowledge networks have not been systemically theorized outside the context of advanced OECD economies and the dearth of empirical evidence leaves this theoretical approach explaining “global” governance lacking.

A governance fields approach builds on theories of IR, GPE and global governance to consider how a competition for recognition in the global education policy



field informs legitimacy and authority in global politics. This perspective in fact builds from the governance literature in that it foregrounds the essential roles occupied in the global education policy field by non-state actors. At the same time, such an approach problematizes the perception of scales that characterize the governance literature.

### **Global education governance fields as novel theoretical enquiry**

The corpus of academic work surveyed above reveal a complex global policy landscape characterized by novel rationalities, mobilities, and technologies impinging on the concept of “global education governance.” Yet these approaches fall short in providing a compelling explanation of global education governance.

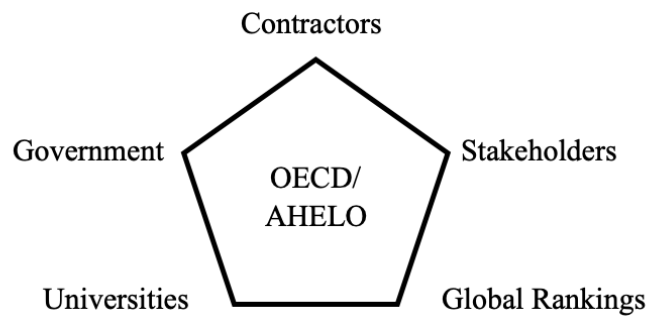
As an intergovernmental organization, the OECD represents members states but its global education mandate stretches beyond its membership to include other countries and education systems. The OECD also draws in networks of non-state actors in the development and implementation of its work in global education. Accordingly, how well do “traditional,” or state-centric, approaches across academic literatures explain AHELO?

My principal theoretical contribution in this dissertation is the identification of a **global education governance field** in which authority to implement global education projects relies on a challenging integration of epistemological legitimacy, technical feasibility, and other forms of moral and pragmatic legitimacy. This integration of authority and legitimacy in global governance is not well captured by social science

literatures favouring state-centric theoretical approaches in which authority is mostly assigned to public and private actors a priori.

The global education governance field reveals a critical space to understand, empirically, how authority is constituted among a range of actors, institutions, technologies and discourses. In my dissertation these authorities, and their relationship to AHELO, are described in Figure 6 (below):

*Figure 6: Relations of authority in AHELO*



This figure shows the OECD and its AHELO study in a governance field crowded with governmental authorities (including quality assurance agencies); education experts and international contractors designing AHELO; academic, employer, union and philanthropic stakeholders; and university administrators, faculty and students. Global rankings are also included as an authoritative actor, as the indices, benchmarks and indicators that entail ranking instruments possess an authority described by Lingard et al. as “policy as numbers.” Numerical indicators are especially germane to the global governance

literature because of their performative function as sources of expert authority in policy making.

Biermann et al. (2009: 15) thus describe a “governance architecture” that is defined “as the meta-level,” or “overarching system of public and private institutions that are valid or active in a given issue area of world politics.” Yet Biermann et al.’s description of these architectures assumes authority into the analysis and fails to account for the role of indicators as technologies of (education) governance. My global education governance fields approach thus incorporates Sending’s (2015) thesis that authority in global governance is relational and subject to a competition for recognition over a given policy domain. A relational perspective thus interrogates sources of authority and their interactional effects within governance architectures, thereby contributing to theory of global governance that accounts for authority and legitimacy more specifically.

A global education governance fields approach specifically challenges the academic literature in the following ways:

1. A governance fields approach resists the urge to view global education projects in (neo)realist terms driven exclusively by powerful states or by IOs, including the OECD, that coordinate global public policy. Studies of education policy typically draw on the experiences of governments or of public institutions thereby delimiting the scope of analysis to (predominantly) state actors. The global scope and influence of OECD education draws attention to the supra-

and sub-national actors and networks that sustain or, conversely, resist such education projects.

2. While transnational knowledge networks undergird and sustain OECD governance, the mapping of these networks in/onto centres of knowledge accumulation and production (e.g., global universities) remains under-theorized. The academic literature (e.g., Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Carroll and Beaton, 2000) identifies universities as important sites of capital production without considering the ways in which knowledge production is enabled and resisted within these universities. A governance fields approach considers how global universities are indeed part and parcel of global capital without diminishing the agency of actors within the university to enable or to contest academic capitalism.
3. Education neoliberalism is not as totalizing and inexorable as critics, including Wendy Brown and Michael Peters, posit. While reforms to university governance models via novel quality assurance systems have the potential to dramatically alter higher education delivery, content and value in a myriad of ways, these neoliberal forces are far from uncontested and inevitable. A governance fields approach that recognizes relational authority (Sending, 2015) permits a way to theorize how (economic) discourses, educational practices, and actor participation determines a particular configuration of authority and legitimacy in global higher education. Education neoliberalism is

far from deterministic; rather, neoliberal rationalities are sensitive to context and, accordingly, are vernacularized and anchored differently across education systems.

4. A public policy/public administration perspective theorizes AHELO's failure to proceed to Main Study in bureaucratic and organizational terms (Harmsen and Braband, 2019); a fields approach holds policy failure in tension by recognizing that bureaucratic and epistemic actors constantly seek to (re)deploy resources in an effort to obtain a position of supra-ordinate authority within a governance field. A fields approach considers how policy initiatives (like AHELO) that rely on comparative indicators contribute to a "deep structuration" of education field dynamics (Erkkila and Piironen, 2018); this suggests the value of comparative education indicators may outlast the program(s) for which they were initially developed, problematizing the policy failure narrative.

These implications are more fully explored in the concluding chapter.

However, there are some weaknesses in my theoretical approach to global education governance fields. Primarily, a fields approach does not provide the reader with a clear definition of power and authority. If authority is considered relational, as Sending insists, it becomes exceptionally difficult to isolate causality or the effect of one type of authority upon another. For example, the OECD's learning outcomes assessment regime includes state and bureaucratic authorities; technical experts and technical authorities; and

university and academic authorities that include administrators but also faculty and students. These relations of authority can not be determined *a priori* to the interaction of one actor with another. The interaction of faculty with survey questions represents an occasion to establish authority over the assessment process and thereby assert a position of super-ordinate field recognition: university administrators, for example, shape the education governance field when they incorporate OECD assessment instruments into curriculum and program design and delivery.

### **Contributions to the academic literature**

Capitalizing on a seminal study of the OECD in global education (Henry et al., 2001), Lingard and colleagues (2005) began to draw theoretical power from Bourdieu to further develop the education policy field against the framework of novel rationalities ushered by the global knowledge economy - principally a policy as numbers rationality (Lingard, Taylor and Rawolle, 2005). By 2008, the “economising” effects of globalization on education prompted a refined theoretical approach that considered the “cross-field” dynamics of global education (Rawolle and Lingard, 2008), thus linking education studies more concretely within theoretical traditions developed in education sociology, comparative education, and political science.

In parallel to this implementation of Bourdieu’s sociological framework emerged a Foucault-inspired research community loosely coordinated under the umbrella of “International Assessment Studies” (Grek, 2009; 2012; Ozga, 2012; Addey, 2014; Addey

and Sellar, 2018; Addey and Gorur, 2018; Verger et al., 2019) seeking to interrogate the policy as numbers rationality framing governing global education “at a distance” (Rose, 1991). This policy as numbers approach thus seeks to (re)frame the human capital narrative espoused by the OECD within a theory of governmentality overlaid with elements of neoliberal economic orthodoxy.

My study thus expands on and further illuminates the concept of “field dynamics” in global governance and allows for what Ole Sending refers to as a relational ontology in policy analysis. This approach supposes that authority and legitimacy of actors in any given field is determined by a competition for recognition (Sending, 2015: 21-23). A fields analysis draws specifically on Bourdieu’s idea that the *subjective* construction of actors’ positioning in any given field exists alongside/interacts with the *objective* conditions of the field’s evolution over time (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Sending, 2015).

The OECD can thus be described as a site of “global assemblage” (Collier and Ong, 2008) in the way it conceptualizes “the mix of policies, steering technologies, discursive elements, human and social agents...that constitute the spaces of reform in higher education in which rankings are employed” (Lim and Ørberg, 2017: 94). Rather than relying exclusively on evidence-based tools and methodologies to assert primacy in the global education field, the OECD enacts its own imaginary of reputation.

Field authority is produced, in part, through incorporating “subjective” student responses from survey data into an “objective” and translatable policy instrument (Latour,

1987). This has the effect of permitting the OECD to administer its AHELO tool across various national and systemic environments while enshrining AHELO's methodological and epistemological foundation. Despite the recent proliferation of scholarly interest in assessing the policy impact of rankings, there remains a dearth of empirical analysis examining how the OECD coordinates novel ranking tools like AHELO into national and subnational contexts.

This dissertation and its empirical research into AHELO contribute to a wide range of literatures touching on international relations, public policy, comparative education, and education sociology. My theoretical enquiry seeks to integrate a governance fields approach with global political economy. AHELO is an apt case study in this regard because it reveals the competition for recognition, legitimacy and authority in a global education policy field among trans- and sub-national actors.

The following two empirical chapters offer a sustained analysis of AHELO's global governance architecture and the project's implementation in Ontario, Mexico and Egypt.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: CONVENING TECHNICAL AUTHORITY FOR AHELO**

The previous chapter presented theoretical approaches to the study of global education governance drawing on different scholarly perspectives from across the social sciences. My review of the academic literature brought into relief important themes related to legitimacy and authority in a global education landscape characterized by multi-scalar and polycentric sources and forms of authority.

As the first of two empirical chapters, this chapter draws on interview data and primary source documents from the OECD focusing on AHELO's development from initial conceptualization in 2006-07 through to technical and managerial development over 2008-09. This chapter looks at the convening of technical and managerial authority as a crucial foundation for establishing the OECD's scientific feasibility for AHELO. In the process of describing AHELO's technical foundation, my study seeks to identify sources of authority and, following, some of the central tensions leading to an authority-legitimacy gap theorized in the governance literature.

### **Building legitimacy for the “holy grail” of assessments**

Political questions around the desirability, possibility and feasibility of an AHELO were first conceived in a meeting of OECD higher education ministers in June 2006 in

Athens<sup>80</sup> (OECD, 2012: 55) and fleshed out over three subsequent ad-hoc experts meetings throughout in April, July and October of 2007 (OECD/EDU, 2008a). Marietta Giannakou, Greece's Minister of National Education and Religious Affairs, framed the expectations around what a future AHELO could accomplish:

[...] measuring the quality of higher education outcomes is needed both to justify the allocation of public resources and the effectiveness with which they are used by increasingly autonomous institutions, and also to pursue enhancements in the quality and relevance of educational outcomes more broadly and systematically, so that higher education institutions (HEIs) serve economies and local communities effectively (Giannakou in OECD, 2012: 58).

AHELO was problematized by the ministerial delegates at this early stage in terms of what a robust comparative assessment could accomplish for “economies and local communities” (*ibid.*) - clearly establishing a political rationale for the feasibility study. Disseminating the discourse in this way further served to reinforce the legitimacy of allocating public resources toward improving the “relevance” of education through establishing comparative indicators as a more reliable proxy for education quality - a point emphasized early in discussions around AHELO's use in linking human capital development to economic productivity (OECD/AHELO, 2013: 10).

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<sup>80</sup> From my interview with a senior OECD member with knowledge of AHELO: “Even prior to that [meeting in 2006], it was in setting up that meeting that issues arose about quality of higher education. It's quite clear that there was an influence, or an echo, from the PISA study” (interview, OECD, March 2013).

Such political statements signalled the beginning of the AHELO project but also hinted at realistic possibilities of failure. One senior member of the Institute for the Management of Higher Education (IMHE), the institutional voice in EDU tasked with helping to define AHELO's strategic priorities, thus remarked: "We wanted to show it was an idea worth pursuing even though there was a very high chance of us not getting what we wanted because it's a holy grail: what is a learning outcome? How do you define it? How do you measure it? How do you compare it? What do you do with it once you have it? Will that bias the way it's used? All sorts of questions like that" (interview, OECD/IMHE, March 2013).<sup>81</sup>

*Figure 7: AHELO governance (early phase)*

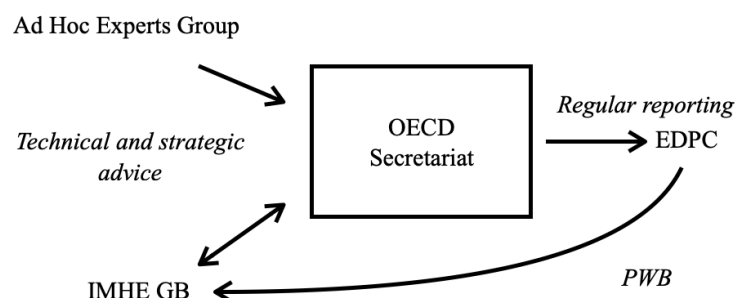


Figure 7 (above) illustrates the relationship between key nodes of OECD authority at this early stage. The Secretariat, responsible for coordinating departmental resources toward constructing AHELO, received input, technical advice and dialogue from the ad hoc Experts Group in addition to guidance on policy priorities from the IMHE. The Education Policy Committee (EDPC), meanwhile, established a Programme of Work and Budget

<sup>81</sup> This IMHE member was an official with a European higher education funding council.

(PWB) for AHELO to help orient the IMHE's budgetary priorities (refer to Chapter Two for more information about the AHELO budget and overall governance structure).

These early questions paved the way for future discussions around how to build AHELO into a technical proof of concept; they also served to remind that technical expertise and political will were inextricably linked in the AHELO feasibility study.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, these early conceptualizations hinted at an organizational discourse pregnant with uncertainty and tension around the study's purpose, scope and methodology.

Some countries found AHELO attractive, in theory, but were unwilling to join the feasibility study as participants:

My contributions were mostly at the governing body level. But we did contribute as a country £160,000 to the project, but we didn't participate as a trial country for the instruments. So we were interested in AHELO's potential - because we felt that if we could answer this question it would be a really good thing to do; what are the learning outcomes and how to go about understanding them? From the beginning we realized it was a hard question to answer but we felt it was worth a go. Because even if you got part of the answer it would be useful - so we thought it was worth supporting (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013).

In 2008-2009, when the financial crisis would prompt the OECD to scour their members for additional sources of funds, the AHELO imaginary proved lucrative enough to secure funding from additional country participants it required to continue with the feasibility study (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 85).

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<sup>82</sup> AHELO was also described in terms of a quest for a "holy grail" in Douglass et al. (2012): <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/globalhighered/searching-holy-grail-learning-outcomes>

***First meeting of experts: defining the “multi-dimensional quality space”***

As a higher education management tool, AHELO would help OECD education policy leaders establish and then navigate a “multi-dimensional quality space.” The contours of this space began to crystallize in the early experts’ meetings. AHELO would not be a “single performance measure...used for a uni-dimensional ranking of institutions or countries” (OECD/EDU, 2007(8): 6). Rather, AHELO data would capture a range of quantifiable variables that could be used to measure different proxies of learning: “higher education systems, institutions, departments and faculty could then be situated in this space depending on the prevalence of the different quality attributes” (*ibid.*).

This idea of a space in which to “cut up the data” reflected and reinforced a market logic underpinning AHELO: evidence-based tools would permit consumers (students) to better gauge institutional attributes of quality, with the end result a more efficient systemic approach to education reform. “Consumers would then be able to choose programmes and institutions depending on the configuration of the quality attributes that are most relevant to them...[it] would also become possible to portray policy trajectories of institutions and systems over time, as they change their position on the different dimensions of this ‘quality space’” (*ibid.*). Student choice was situated here as a the dependent variable that would help determine the effectiveness of different policy settings within this space. Furthermore, the idea of multi-dimensional quality space appealing to different education actors seemed to augment, strengthen and legitimize the

field recognition of technical experts and quality assurance communities within the OECD's education policy environment.

That AHELO should be developed by technical experts and econometricians viewing students as consumers and rational choice maximizers had not always been the dominant narrative within IMHE. Indeed, the IMHE was at the locus of organizational change in OECD education, and strategic priorities around aligning student learning outcomes to performance metrics marked an important cultural and bureaucratic shift identified in some measure by Harmsen and Braband (2019)'s failure analysis.

There was a sense among some in IMHE that AHELO should have been controlled by "people who knew what they were doing," rather than being guided by a narrow (economic) orthodoxy:

Marijk [Van der Wende from the University of Amsterdam], who was the previous Chair, she'd be worth talking to. She was at the centre of this. And her view was oh my goodness this new idea, which came out of nowhere, was not coming out of IMHE it was coming out of the Secretary General; this new idea, if we're going to make this work, it would be much better if it was formed and controlled by people who knew what they were doing. Higher education people throughout the world, not OECD technical analysts or people outside IMHE with one particular point of view. I think it was Marijk's objective to ensure that the right people with the right kinds of skills were assigned to the task (interview, OECD/AHELO: March 2013).

As AHELO began to crystallize in the Directorate for Education - especially under the policy entrepreneurship of Andreas Schleicher - its social purpose and design remained just as ambitious yet arguably oriented precisely toward “OECD technical analysts” and “people outside the OECD with one particular point of view.”

In truth, the expectations around what AHELO would/could represent began to splinter between some of the key actors in the study (see Figure 6). The accountability and quality assurance mechanisms implied by AHELO compounded fears from some institutional representatives on the IMHE that AHELO would simply be another ranking tool:

I think over the period as well expectations changed; there was a strong view from some that it should be an accountability tool; and a strong view from others that it would be nowhere near it. During that period governments got more interested in accountability mechanisms and I think institutions got more fearful of ranking systems. So that was happening in the background, which affected people’s perceptions (interview, OECD/AHELO: March 2013).

That pivotal MCM in Athens (2006), summarized in official meeting minutes, captured the vision of “multi-dimensional quality space” the OECD was innovating into reality via tools like AHELO: “[...] none of the experts considered the goal unreachable and all recognised that reliable information on learning outcomes would only rise in importance, as higher education would continue to diversify, internationalise, and as new virtual ways

of delivery and provision would make *physical space as a unit of service provision less relevant*” (OECD/AHELO, 2008a: 2, emphasis added).<sup>83</sup>

In other words, AHELO would contribute to new modes of learning and of learning delivery as universities underwent radical transformation from centres of learning to centres of knowledge management within a novel global governance architecture. This was indeed problematic for key stakeholders, including Education International, the union that represents over three million higher education and research staff in 100 national organizations:

At an extreme, a standardisation of learning outcomes threatens to disrupt the inherent ambiguity, fluidity, uncertainty and even discomfort that characterise the educational journey...If we are to advance understanding and to transform students from consumers to producers of knowledge, then higher education teaching and research must be allowed to evolve in directions that are not predictable (Education International, 2013; np).

At the outset of AHELO there was clearly a fragmentation in the vision over what AHELO could and should be. This tension was visible within the organization as the Secretariat sought to bring its conceptualization to fruition through meetings with IMHE. It was also visible in fault lines among academic communities outside the OECD. Indeed, these tensions pointed to a growing authority-legitimacy gap in the OECD.

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<sup>83</sup> It is little wonder that university representatives to the IMHE, many of whom were faculty members, felt so threatened by the tone of these early meetings. Tensions revealed a biding discontent with the premise of AHELO (neoliberal fatigue) that spilled over into the subsequent stage of the feasibility study.



**Surveying the field of epistemic authority (2006-2007)**

Following the Athens conference in 2006 and the bureaucratic momentum behind AHELO, the OECD turned to established instruments and processes in the global education environment to begin building technical and practical feasibility for AHELO. Securing the enrolment from leading technical contractors with international experience designing international large-scale assessment (ILSA) instruments would bolster the technical validity claims made by AHELO while facilitating the political process of converting the “proof of concept” into a full-fledged main study.

AHELO was discursively constructed as a “PISA for higher education” for the similarity in its technical approach to measuring outcomes but most certainly also because of the OECD’s ambition to convert its feasibility study to a main programme with global reach and influence. The analogy with PISA was important in anchoring a sense of possibility behind the AHELO feasibility study. Indeed, PISA provided an existing governance structure and methodological basis that seemed to implement well in variable national settings. The OECD seemed to be cresting the wave of global success with its “family of assessments,” secure in its process of convening authority for transnational education studies.

PISA was the centrepiece of what Peter Ewell, the highly respected technical expert leading the TAG, referred to as the OECD’s family of assessments. “A family of assessments, adapted to different languages and cultures (analogous to the approach used

in PISA and PIAAC), is one strategy for developing a common metric for outcomes to support” valid cross-national measures of quality (OECD/AHELO, 2013: 10). A senior policy director with knowledge of AHELO framed the comparison with PISA in terms of the quality data such a study could produce:

I took part in the experts meetings that preceded the beginning of AHELO in 2006. Even prior to that [meeting in 2006], it was in setting up that meeting that issues arose about quality of higher education. It’s quite clear that there was an influence, or an echo, from the PISA study. I think the first person I ever heard refer to the PISA for higher education was curiously enough another German, the president of the German Rector’s Conference, Klaus Landfried, at an IMHE general meeting in 2004. Nothing came of that, but looking back you can see the importance of the idea (interview, OECD/AHELO: March 2013).

In addition to the robustness of the established PISA and PIAAC regime, the OECD’s initial survey benefited from an existing theoretical-methodological foundation developed by the Tuning Academy and subsequently rolled into the AHELO study. The Tuning methodology had provided the basis for integrating degree outcomes to labour market policies across the eurozone “to move easily from one country to another with full recognition of qualifications and periods of study, and access to the European labour market.”<sup>84</sup> Tuning provided, in short, EDU’s “pragmatic legitimacy” (Suchman, 1995) to scale AHELO using this widely accepted methodology.

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<sup>84</sup> “The Bologna Process revisited - The Future of the European Higher Education Area, 2015. Part 1 - Looking back: 15 years of convergence” (<http://www.ehea.info/pid34248/history.html>)

The Tuning Academy, administered jointly between the University of Deusto in Spain and the University of Groningen in The Netherlands, provided the framework for contextualizing learning outcomes in economics (OECD/AHELO Working Paper, 2011a) and in engineering (OECD/AHELO Working Paper, 2011b). According to their website, the Tuning Academy operates simultaneously as a research institute, as a publisher of scientific studies in higher education, and as a methodology closely linked to Bologna and the EHEA: “Tuning is a university-driven initiative, which was originally created to offer a concrete approach to the implementation of the European Bologna Process within higher education institutions and subject areas” (OECD, 2011b: 7). Drawing in this *academic* source of authority served to strengthen the basis for AHELO’s “moral” legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) with respect to its academic stakeholders. On the surface, AHELO’s technical development was designed “by universities for universities.” The OECD presented Tuning’s legitimacy as a educational methodology with global applications:

Having been tested and found successful on several continents, the approach can be considered legitimate internationally. In 2007, groups of high level peers validated the Tuning approach as a methodology as well as an application in numerous disciplines. It is currently applied in more than 30 subject areas, in many institutions throughout Europe and Latin America as well as some countries in (Eur)Asia (e.g. Kyrgyz Republic, Georgia). Information sessions have raised awareness of the Tuning approach in other regions of the world, such as

Australia, India and Japan. At present, the Tuning methodology is being tested in three US states (OECD, 2011b: 8).

In 2008, the Secretariat contracted the Tuning Academy to develop frameworks guiding the AHELO instrumentation. The Tuning-AHELO project thus convened “academics from a range of different countries in order to reflect and agree on definitions of expected/intended learning outcomes in economics and engineering. The outcomes of this Tuning-AHELO project could serve as an intermediate output of the AHELO feasibility study, to demonstrate that agreements on expected learning outcomes can be achieved in contrasted disciplines” (OECD/GNE, 2009/12: 6).

Crucially for the AHELO feasibility project, Tuning had been applied to various education environments, including the EHEA (Bologna), and outside the eurozone, including the US, via Lumina, thereby solidifying its appropriateness across variable institutional and cultural settings (Powell, 2013). The EHEA’s implementation of Tuning signalled two important lessons for AHELO’s policy architects: First, Tuning demonstrated a political will to link learning outcomes to regional and global labour markets; secondly, a methodology existed that permitted Tuning to scale in quite different national contexts, thereby bolstering AHELO’s technical feasibility claims.

Tuning is thus a critical element of the OECD’s moral and pragmatic legitimacy in the global education policy field, helping the organization achieve field recognition in global education. Tuning is further evidence of the way epistemological governance (Sellar and Lingard, 2014) steers education policy making through innovative policy

contexts. Indeed, the aim of the Tuning Academy “is to be an organisation which is *permanently aware* of social demands and future needs, playing a key role in Higher Education through research, experimentation, educational innovation and support for decision making in policy on education and employment”.<sup>85</sup>

Tuning’s frameworks describe not only degree level expectations in particular disciplines; these comparative frameworks establish how problems within disciplines are typically constructed, communicated and solved across languages and between cultures. The Tuning-AHELO project, which surveyed and scaled existing Tuning approaches for AHELO, integrated the Tuning methodology as a way to reach expert consensus on what to measure, e.g., what *could* be reliably measured (OECD, 2012: 108), across variable higher education systems.

Reaching consensus was crucial in securing legitimacy from across the OECD policy community. The Secretariat initiated this process of obtaining consensus by tasking the GNE, which represented the interests of member states in AHELO, to convene an international academic community: “Academics from various countries reflected and agreed upon definitions of expected learning outcomes for bachelor’s-type programmes in economics and engineering” (OECD, 2011b: 6).

However, this process of reflection did not always align with agreement and consensus: critique from Universities Canada and the American Council on Education (UC/CAE) following the conclusion of the feasibility study was a stark reminder that

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<sup>85</sup> <http://tuningacademy.org/what-is-tuning/?lang=en>; emphasis added

universalized methodologies nevertheless possessed unresolved controversies.<sup>86</sup> The “consensus” of academics, so important in mobilizing legitimacy for AHELO, seemed limited in scope and principally involved those academics associated with key research centres in Europe (CHEPS), Italy (University of Florence) and Japan (NIER) involved in constructing the feasibility study itself. This is an important observation because we can see that “academic” sources of authority for AHELO were far from unanimously endorsed. Despite the widely accepted (and broadly implemented) Tuning methodology, Foucault-inspired academics within IMHE raised concerns about such novel techniques of management: “What and why? Not only what...but why. Why are we seeking to create something? according to Foucault I prefer the term of new governmentality because governmentality explains very well one thing, which is by the ways of governing something you create a specific kind of mentality...it means we will reduce the complexities of what is being measured” (interview, OECD/IMHE: March, 2013).

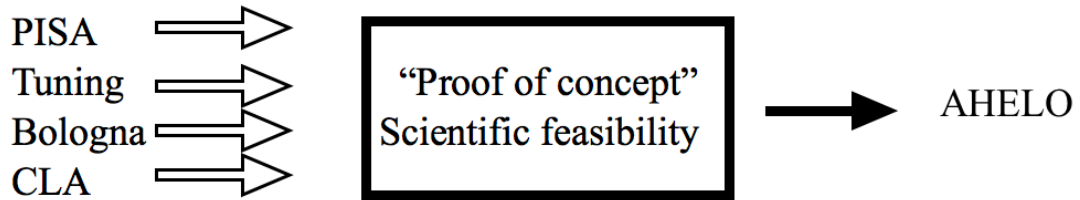
The Tuning-AHELO project so foundational to the construction of global governance thus reminds us of the ways in which academic consensus may (or may not) be reached in politically sensitive projects and, moreover, the way university knowledge (and universities themselves) may be mobilized in support of, and opposition to, such claims to legitimacy. At this early stage of the feasibility study there was no indication of

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<sup>86</sup> [https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server\\_files/files/ACE-UC%20AHELO%20Letter.pdf](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/ACE-UC%20AHELO%20Letter.pdf)

vocal and organized resistance to AHELO by UC/CAE - possibly because they had not been included in ground-level stakeholder consultations.

Figure 8: The “black-boxing” of scientific feasibility



(Source: adapted from Latour, 1987: 1-17)

The process of incorporating Tuning as an “established” methodology recalls Bruno Latour’s concept of the “black box.” Tuning’s validation of assessment frameworks buttressed the OECD’s epistemic authority over what/how to measure learning outcomes and effectively “black-boxed” the methodology through which technical/scientific feasibility could be realistically achieved. In asserting its epistemological authority, the OECD drew on decades of experience administering complex international education studies, ranging from the ILSA regime (IALS, PISA, and PIAAC among others described in the introductory chapter) to comprehensive country-specific *National Reviews of Higher Education* and institutionally-specific sectoral and thematic interventions.

Consolidating technical authority for AHELO was a major step in establishing the OECD’s legitimacy for developing and implementing AHELO. However, it was clear

from my qualitative interviews that epistemic authority was fractured and splintered - especially within IMHE, the locus of institutional and strategic input for AHELO.

### **Enrolling technical experts (2007-2008)**

In April 2007, the OECD convened the first of three international experts meetings and stakeholder consultations to conceptualize the AHELO feasibility study, to establish the technical goals, to tease out methodological complications around assessment, and to assemble the team of contractors to design and lead the study: “Some of the central issues this new group of experts would be dealing with are how to meet the different interests of the stakeholders; whether to build the assessment from an existing instrument or construct a new one; how to define and operationalise the desirable outcomes of higher education (skills and knowledge); how to sample students and how to present the results” (OECD/EDU, 2008).

Initial meetings, documented in declassified OECD documents, reveal how technical expertise came to define the parameters of AHELO. Questions surrounding the values, purposes and goals of AHELO were limited given the exploratory nature of the study; the OECD was chiefly concerned with how data from a feasibility study could be cut in “a three-dimensional matrix” to ultimately guide a future main study (OECD/EDU, 2007(8)).

The first dimension of this matrix included individuals, institutions and policy makers: students making “better informed choices” and employers “seeking to benchmark



qualifications against actual skill measures;” university administrators, departments and faculties “seeking a better understanding of their comparative strengths and weaknesses;” and policy makers “seeking to quantify stocks and flows in high level skills, to obtain better insights into the quality, equity and efficiency of higher education services, and to assess the impact of policy decisions.”

The second dimension of the matrix related to *how* measures of learning outcomes could be applied - “ranging from summative comparisons of institutional performance to diagnostic tools at programme and faculty level.” Finally, the third dimension “considered the kind of instruments needed to serve the respective users” (OECD/EDU, 2007(8): 2-3).

Experts were thus tasked with surveying the ILSA landscape to find suitable and existing assessment tools and to build alliances with stakeholders. “Enrolment of agents into networks,” writes Hamilton, “involves assembling elements and devices, forms of social interactions which will enable the actors to perform the identities required of them within the network. This takes material investments, strong alliances and the skills of policy implementers to make systematic changes feasible” (Hamilton, 2012: 46).

Enrolment thus strengthens policy networks at the key moments of translation, but this strength relies on forming durable alliances:

In forming these groups of 10 to 20 experts [...] a deliberate decision was made to keep the meetings small enough to remain focused, and to ensure the presence of a range of expertise including policy makers, higher education researchers as well as assessment specialists with hands on experience of assessment techniques and

challenges. This pragmatic arrangement made it possible to address a range of issues and provide guidance for a strategy within a limited timeframe but it excluded some stakeholders from these initial discussions. This led to the perception by some that AHELO was being developed without input from certain segments (or groups). Moreover, the presence of experts from the testing industry – while crucial to address some more technical issues and challenges – may have conveyed the impression that the expert task force was skewed towards advocates of standardised testing (Adelman and Hartle, cited in Lederman, 2007; EI, 2007).

These initial experts meetings demonstrated that AHELO's architects were less concerned about the problem of measurement, per se, and more concerned about techniques and tools required to establish technical feasibility. This was indeed in keeping with the scope of the feasibility study.

The chief concern was that AHELO would miss the mark of establishing a way to reliably compare institutions and would therefore not be technically feasible, undermining the efforts in conceptualizing a study that had long been simmering in the OECD's imagination - echoing Woodward's description of the organization's "palliative governance," or its ability to "pre-negotiate" complex projects that do not find institutional/organizational support elsewhere (Woodward, 2009: 75-80).

Indeed, AHELO was innovative, challenging and exploratory because it sought to capture institutional variability across a vast number of individual-, institutional- and national-level variables. For each country had different education systems and tremendous variation across program format, delivery, student recruitment and other

factors particular to institutional settings and higher education political economy. An institutional-level assessment like AHELO “would have to confront issues of differentiation within the system” (OECD/AHELO, 2008a: 3), to put it mildly, while simultaneously engaging with the educational values and social hierarchies underpinning those systems.

The OECD’s technical architects thus confronted three principal issues overlaid by fundamental questions about the legitimacy of the study. First, governments were limited in their ability to incentivize universities to participate in a cross-national study like AHELO, positioning the OECD as a political authority that would invariably frame the collection and deployment of technical data and analysis in potentially coercive ways. And, as evidenced in the application of AHELO testing, institutions had limited ability to compel students to participate in these studies (as in the case of the Nordic countries, cf., OECD/AHELO, 2012: 163). Second, it was thought that because AHELO required system-wide responses to survey questions it would attract administrative responses but not as many faculty responses, thereby obscuring the effectiveness of AHELO as a “tool for improvement at the level of service provision,” e.g., university teaching (OECD/AHELO, 2008a: 3; 2012). Buy-in from faculty, students and administrators was crucial to the integrity of the results of the study. Third, universities in larger tertiary education markets could be more selective in their admission policies, leading to a sample bias in student performance data. Thus, technical and methodological issues were layered with the subtle dynamics of education politics.

Related to the problem of measuring learning gain conferred by institutions (after controlling for faculty responses and students' incoming abilities) was the difficulty in identifying the contextual variables that impacted learning - those cultural and social variables that influenced student learning but that had to be isolated from institutional factors in order to produce reliable data on the quality of learning in university settings.

By the time AHELO was developed there were simply no data to show how this could be accomplished in a cross-national setting. The use of student, faculty, and institutional surveys had been the subject of intense debate in education policy literature, especially in the area of education metrics, quality assurance, and learning outcomes (Nusche, 2008; Ewell et al., 2009).

Indeed, it was the experts' position that disciplinary frameworks and testing strands would produce irrelevant data in the absence of the contextual knowledge provided by well-constructed surveys (Ewell et al., 2009; OECD, 2012). Eventually, over several experts meetings between 2008-2009, consensus was reached on how best to develop the context surveys: "In broad terms, the framework for the context survey instruments set the conceptual focus and scope for this aspect of the work, provided the technical foundations for managing collection, analysis and reporting, and enhanced the efficiency of the assessment" (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 129).

### ***Capturing fundamental competencies***

Yet consensus on *what* the learning outcome frameworks were meant to capture differed markedly from *how* they were to be captured. A key assumption behind selecting

the engineering and economics disciplines pertained to “fundamental” competencies that could reliably be measured even in varied institutional settings.

The experts proposed this approach to selecting “above-content” disciplinary frameworks would be ideal because engineering and economics “are common among institutions in OECD countries, are likely to be less influenced by unique cultural features, and reflect the dynamics of disciplinary change” (OECD/AHELO, 2008a: 5). Furthermore, because these frameworks were thought to be universally valid there was less initial concern about how reliable they could be in a main study.<sup>87</sup>

However, generic competencies - what the OECD refers to as “core, key or workplace transferable skills” (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 113) - proved to be entirely more challenging to identify and measure in varied cultural contexts. As the OECD acknowledged, “different stakeholders in different countries must have the same understanding of the concept” (*ibid.*). And for the limited purposes of the feasibility study,

generic skills are considered the general abilities, capacities or capabilities deployed in all kinds of cognitive activity. These outcomes are seen as broad, enduring skills that, although not domain specific, are developed by frequent practice and exercise in specific domains. These skills are those that would be desired of any student regardless of subject matter or discipline, and are teachable and learnable. They are distinguished from the knowledge or skills of particular

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<sup>87</sup> Even though the main goal of the project was to demonstrate technical feasibility, one clearly discerned an approach that integrated AHELO to a broader organizational narrative found in the *Skills Strategy*. “The experts suggested that adding a longitudinal perspective to the assessments would, over time, allow to assess the external validity of the outcome measures, in terms of how well they predict the success of individuals and how they relate to subsequent individual labour-market outcomes, social outcomes and well-being, as well as assessing to what extent institutions make a difference to global education outcomes” (OECD, 2008a: 6).

performances or domains. Such general abilities are the flexible, fluid capacities developed by and used in learning new things (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 113).

Accordingly, the OECD permitted considerable latitude in the technical precision of these instruments: the OECD was clear this was a feasibility study and not a pilot program (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 69), a significant detail echoed in the AHELO Terms of Reference, in OECD conference presentations and workshops (September 2012 and March 2013), and in my interviews with contractors, members of IMHE, and OECD directors.

The exploratory nature of the study, coupled with the short timeframe from conceptualization to implementation, meant that “there was no need to develop perfect and exhaustive instruments to measure higher education learning outcomes and contexts - i.e. covering all possible aspects of an ideal framework” (OECD, 2012: 110).

Rather, existing instruments (e.g., the Bologna-Tuning frameworks for engineering and economics) could be modified provided that they maintained technical validity and were appropriate to the different contexts in which they were deployed. Rather than focusing on the content of university curricula, the tests sought to measure how students can “think like an Engineer” (OECD, 2013c: 80).

The assessments were designed to tap into students’ higher order thinking in disciplines with “universal” learning outcomes. In this way students were therefore represented as “taxonomies of competence” (Goncalves and Figueiredo, 2010: 39) in

which their “governable” aptitudes and attributes would be measured against the demands of the future knowledge economy.

This concept of generic skills, so integral to the global knowledge economy, was fleshed out in the initial experts meeting in April 2007. Here there was a felt need to capture “transversal higher-order competencies” like problem-solving and critical thinking because these competencies were “widely viewed as critical for the success of individuals and of rising relevance in the information age” (OECD/AHELO 2008a: 4-5). Moreover, it was deemed these generic skills could be compared across cultures because “such competencies are largely invariant across across occupational and cultural contexts and could be applied across higher education institutions, departments and faculties” (*ibid*: 5). Experts thus played an essential role in forming categories of transnational learning competencies.

In surveying the technical landscape, it was decided in the first experts meeting to model the generic skills assessment on the American Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), an instrument developed by the Council on American Education (CAE), one of the original contractors of the AHELO study. (The controversies around this instrument had not yet been fully realized and would only come to light in 2008 and 2009 - see below).

### ***The politics of technical authority***

By the Third Experts meeting in October 2007, the OECD was less certain about the integrity of the CLA and the assumptions underpinning transversal/universal

competencies, finally acknowledging that “[the] importance attached to transversal skills such as critical thinking and problem solving might not be the same in all cultures” (OECD/AHELO, 2008c: 3). This was a critical acknowledgement that the OECD’s evidence-based management approach to “global” education governance was principally informed by selective applications of the Tuning methodology and context-specific instruments like the CLA.

The survey of technical instruments seemed incomplete and even more precarious than originally imagined. “None of these approaches had unanimous support,” confirmed the OECD, as “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” (OECD/AHELO, 2008c: 3). The OECD may have also anticipated the messy struggles between its leading (and rival) contractors, ACER and CAE, who were competitors in the field of education assessment (interview, OECD/GNE: March 2013).

The merging of technical and political authority of education experts began to crystallize in these early OECD meetings. In its summary of the third experts meeting on 26-27 October 2007, the Secretariat noted that “the work of assessing higher education outcomes should be viewed as a process...[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” (OECD/EDU, 2008c: 2).



Recalling the instrumental role played by technical and epistemic communities in the public policy literature (e.g., Haas, 1992), here we see how the ad hoc experts group was advising the OECD to communicate a more explicit (political) message about the role and purpose of AHELO. By 2010, the AHELO Consortium, led by ACER, was assigned a central role in forging a political and communications strategy as per the AHELO Terms of Reference (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 97; see also Chapter Two) even before stakeholders were included in any aspect of oversight in the study. Meeting the “different interests” of stakeholders implies a consensus-building project where, in fact, these stakeholders were not formally part of the conversation until after the survey of existing instruments had been performed and the tools initially validated for the purposes of the feasibility study. The exclusion of these critical stakeholder communities at the outset of the study further wedged an authority-legitimacy gap in the AHELO study.

### **Managing AHELO: 2008-2009**

How do technical experts manage large-scale international assessments in education? Sending (2015: 6) argues that authority in governance fields is determined through competition over material and symbolic resources. Drawing on Bourdieu (2000; 1984; and Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), Sending argues that a field, including one that constitutes the development, management, and implementation of data tools, “treats actors as strategic and interest-driven but in ways that are specific and heavily conditioned by the configuration and dynamics of each field” (Sending, 2015: 6).

The AHELO Terms of Reference structured the field development in which contractors negotiated not only the expectations of the OECD and its key stakeholders; this field also fundamentally challenged the way experts and contractors managed complex education projects as they strove to design novel education metrics.

In 2008 and 2009, another three expert groups were tasked to provide input towards the development of terms of reference for the AHELO Call for Tenders. Two expert groups adapted the Tuning approach for AHELO to identify expected learning outcomes in economics and engineering - the disciplines chosen for the feasibility study - while the third group provided recommendations towards the development of a contextual dimension for the feasibility study. In September 2009, a Technical Review Panel was also set up to review the technical aspects of proposals submitted in response to the AHELO Call for Tenders, and prepare recommendations for the AHELO GNE. Subsequently, another three expert groups were set up by the chosen contractor to develop assessment frameworks and instruments: the AHELO Economics Expert Group, AHELO Engineering Expert Group and AHELO Contextual Dimension Expert Group. These groups met in 2010 and 2011 and experts from participating countries served on the discipline-specific groups to ensure that the instruments developed are internationally valid and reflect the diverse cultural and curricular contexts of participating countries (OECD, 2012: 198).

Between 2008-11, the OECD convened no less than **eight** different bodies of experts “to ensure that the instruments developed are internationally valid and reflect the diverse cultural and curricular contexts of participating countries” (*ibid.*). This technical development was indeed complex - and made more complex by a murky governance

structure that seemed to complicate the “configuration and dynamics” of the field within which actors deployed their expertise. This configuration of technical, managerial and political authority aptly illustrates the nexus of expert governance in the field of global higher education. Mapping the role of these education experts in the development of AHELO is a significant finding in this dissertation.

The second technical phase of AHELO thus introduces the delegation of managerial (“steering”) authority to the IMHE Governing Board (IMHE GB) and a hybridized authority to the Group of National Experts (GNE), who comprised members nominated by OECD member states (see section on AHELO governance structure in Chapter Two). Here the GNE’s role was “partly managerial” because it was the locus of political-technical authority in AHELO, bridging technical expertise with a contractual obligation to represent OECD members (OECD, 2009: 4). This shared governance of AHELO mirrored in some way the shared (and contested) technical authority involving the AHELO consortium eventually lead by ACER. Indeed, AHELO’s expert governance structure brings with it increased technical and managerial complexity as the testing materials and instruments are translated and adapted for international scale.

These managerial developments unfolded as the world was gripped by a devastating financial crisis in September-October 2008 - a crisis that invariably impacted the OECD’s management of the feasibility study. Two countries withdrew from the study (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 84) and a sharply reduced budget had implications for the governance (funding) of AHELO. The Secretariat was compelled to renegotiate

contractual terms in order to reduce the scope of the study (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 85), which required an acrobatic backpedaling of commitments originally communicated to participants.

***Revising AHELO's Terms of References and scope of study***

Revisions to the study involved reducing the number of face-to-face expert meetings to reduce travel costs; omitting multiple choice questions developed by ACER from the generic skills strand (these were later restored); narrowing the scope of engineering assessment to civil engineering alone; and foregoing an institutional contextual dimension that would have, under more ideal circumstances, ensured “that what was being tested was valid in as many as possible institutional and national contexts...to check for cultural and linguistic appropriateness” (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 110).

Further, the addition of Abu Dhabi (UAE), Egypt, Kuwait, the Russian Federation and Colombia to the study helped close the funding gap while adding “enhanced geographic, cultural and linguistic diversity” (*ibid.*, 85). While adding non-members to the study certainly appealed to a broader strategy of global engagement, it was nonetheless a tactical measure designed to instrumentally overcome acute budgetary shortfalls and, accordingly, was viewed with some degree of scepticism by stakeholders (interview, OECD/IMHE, September 2012). At the same time, these countries introduced additional pressures on the study: instruments had to be translated and adapted into two additional languages (Arabic and Russian) and the IMHE was suddenly faced with greater

institutional representation, potentially straining its steering of the study (Chapter Five delves into some of these challenges).

Several important technical and managerial developments unfolded throughout 2009, namely a revised scoping for AHELO in 2010 that involved the technical integration of two proprietary testing systems developed and implemented by ACER and the CAE, respectively. This period was particularly tense as the governance of AHELO strained under the exogenous shock (Williams, 2009) of the financial crisis and the inadequate communications strategy seeking to link subnational voices in AHELO's steering and governance.

The IMHE, the institutional voice within OECD, was at this stage left with little voice in the technical development, for the foundational tensions underlying AHELO had been resolved through the technical survey of existing instruments and their gradual adaptations to the project at hand. Hamilton (2012: 46) reminds us that in “the moment of mobilization the few come to speak as the many. There is one united voice and a new settlement which is no longer questioned. This is the stage at which ‘black boxing’ of previously unstable truths and meanings occurs. Policy has succeeded in imposing a new order on a social field - for the time being.” And yet, as the study evolved, authority remained tenuous.

The IMHE GB was composed of diverse institutional (university) representatives, country representatives (governments and agencies). Because of the concerns from universities regarding the scope and policy goals attached AHELO - which remained

fairly opaque even as the feasibility study garnered initial support from members states - it was deemed critically important that the IMHE was directly involved in guiding the scope of the study:

Some associations of universities have made clear their concern that an assessment would be used as an accountability or ranking tool rather than as a spur to institutional improvement. For these reasons it is proposed that the management of the feasibility study be placed under the immediate supervision of the Governing Board of the OECD Institutional Management in Higher Education (IMHE) Programme which brings together both Governments and institutions. This mechanism allows countries which are not directly involved in the feasibility study to influence decision-making and to monitor progress (OECD/AHELO, 2008: 5).

The discursive dissemination of AHELO's goals were particularly crucial with respect to AHELO's potential detractors, for its ultimate success required political buy-in (enrolment) from states as well as institutions. Even if technically possible, press reports exacerbated the OECD's mounting anxieties over the practical feasibility of AHELO (OECD/AHELO, 2010: 4). Buy-in depended on experts demystifying comparative assessment tools as a normal and everyday part of the higher education landscape:

Yeah it's an extremely complex project, there are so many stakeholders and roles and interests and expertise, and there's also so many people that are scared of it. I'm not gun-ho about testing or assessment, but just this morning, even in this seminar, I was surprised because I thought the debate about whether this was necessary has already passed, I thought it was already done!

I mean there was this American woman - I like hearing what you have to say, but you're going back about ten years! (interview, OECD/Consortium: March 2013).

For this contractor, testing and assessment had evolved within 10 years from a normative argument (why it serves) to one of assessing its practical feasibility (how it serves), pointing to the ability of technical expertise to seamlessly integrate policy as numbers within a normative discourse beyond controversy. This casual remark is further evidence of the way the global education policy field, described by Lingard and colleagues, reveals the authority of evidence-based tools and actors who employ them.

In 2008, the transfer of responsibilities for the management of the AHELO study was given to the IMHE Governing Board in order to “[concentrate] on developing the broad strategy for the AHELO feasibility study, and for gaining stakeholder commitment” (OECD/IMHE, 2010: 4). On the surface, IMHE possessed the legitimacy required to enrol institutional support and to advance institutional/university interests, potentially shaping an alternate vision of AHELO that accommodated more stakeholder interests within the academic community. “The reality, though,” explained an OECD director, “is that IMHE GB is made up of countries and institutions paid for by the subscriptions of members, if the EPC tried to tell it to do something it (IMHE GB) didn’t want to do, *you’d have a constitutional crisis*, or you’d have some sort of fight going on” (interview, OECD/EPC: March 2013). This spoke clearly to the fragmented authority of the OECD.

The OECD was becoming increasingly insecure in the face of stakeholder opposition to the intention and goals attached to AHELO: “There has been considerable Press interest in AHELO from the earliest days and this has generated high expectations and some misunderstanding of the OECD’s intentions,” lamented the OECD in an AHELO progress report. “Efforts have been made to respond to enquiries, to clarify the objectives of the feasibility study and to involve a range of actors and stakeholders in order to develop understanding of and support for AHELO” (OECD/AHELO, 2010: 4).

Senior members of the IMHE were less than keen about this transfer of responsibility to the IMHE and what an institution devoid of “content knowledge” and clear sources of funding implied for the overall governance of AHELO:

[On] the governance issue...it quickly became apparent to me that the responsibility for the program [AHELO] might be sheeted over to IMHE, that IMHE had no budgetary control or influence over the process. That’s shocking governance. We spent about a year getting [governance] clarified. It is the Education Policy Committee of the OECD where the decisions on budget are made. Now, it’s not just a question of the EPC, because you’ve got members and institutions that are helping to fund the project. So, IMHE I guess provides some role in undersigning it, and there’s a content knowledge either in the board, or in groups that spin off the board. The governance of it in a content sense is – the other side of it is probably that it’s in a much better condition than it was a year ago – but, it’s brittle. The budget decisions need to be made by the EPC to whom we would report (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013).



This perception that IMHE would be accountable for policy/budgetary decisions endorsed by the EDPC reflected a fragmentation of authority at the highest level of OECD stewardship for AHELO. Another senior IMHE member echoed similar concerns over the governance of AHELO: “now the big issue on the governance side was who is responsible for what we get for all this money? If it doesn’t work who is accountable for the performance of all of this? And there was the GNE, the TAG, IMHE, EPC...I think IMHE was always concerned that they were being held accountable for decisions that were actually being taken elsewhere. So I would describe the governance of it as a little messy” (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013). The “messy” governance of AHELO was compounded by the pressures from the global financial crisis, which accentuated the accountability behind funding AHELO and seemed to place this burden on the IMHE.

In response to the very real need to include more diverse voices, the OECD created an ad hoc Stakeholder’s Consultative Group (SCG) in February 2009 “to share information on AHELO progress with stakeholders, and to exchange views on its implementation as a preliminary step towards discussions of the potential impact of a fully-fledged AHELO if the feasibility study is a success” (OECD/AHELO, 2010: 4). Despite its assignment by the OECD as an “informal group” with “no direct steering into the project,” the interests of this group were directly linked to AHELO’s future application in a wide variety of contexts.

Members in the SCG included student (European Students’ Union), teacher (Education International) and trade unions (TUAC/OECD); university and faculty

associations (including Universities Canada and the American Council on Education); business interest groups; arms-length state funding organizations; and non-profit groups like Lumina that also funded a significant portion of the feasibility study (see OECD/AHELO, 2012: 214 for a complete list of members).

Despite its claims to representativeness, the ideas and input of the SCG had little actual impact on the feasibility study; even the OECD language describing a “preliminary step” in the direction of a “potential” future study seemed a rhetorical tactic meant to placate some of these stakeholders. The OECD’s insistence of social inclusion paled against the more “practical” elements governing a study that had far reaching implications for other, perhaps more important, stakeholders, including employers and governments. It was chiefly the lack of early and meaningful representation from an academic advisory group that channeled concerted resistance to AHELO even after the revised scope of study was presented by the OECD in April 2015.

In summary, the *post facto* introduction of a more representative stakeholder group spoke to the incoherent governance that characterized the early phase of the AHELO study. The OECD was evidently concerned with getting the data right for a technical proof of concept. Delegation of the communications strategy to the AHELO Consortium further evidenced a political role for technical experts in the global higher education governance field.

### **Crises in technical and managerial authority**

Even as technical controversies were barely resolved around the generic skills framework - in particular the feasibility of including a contextual dimension and the paring down of MCQs - contractual disputes exacerbated deep fissures in the governance architecture. The emergence of additional key actors in the AHELO study, including contractors and new country participants, begin to affect the operational management of the study. The OECD seemingly begins to lose legitimacy from within its institutional membership: “Can I say also that the leadership of IMHE was a real problem at the director level...we had a growing sense of unease that we [the IMHE board] would be held accountable for it. The unevenness of knowledge in the Board is profound (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013).

Compounding the perceived problems of leadership and senior management in OECD education was a growing rift between contractors precipitated by a revised terms of reference in 2010. After the initial survey of experts in 2007-2008 produced the CLA instrument for use in the generic skills strand, the OECD reopened the bidding and introduced a new lead contractor, ACER.

This revision of terms set into motion a lasting conflict between the CAE, who scored the original contract, and ACER, who now commanded leadership of the AHELO consortium in “competitive collaboration” (Harmsen and Braband, 2019) with the CAE and the US-based Educational Testing Services.<sup>88</sup> The Chair of the GNE characterized

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<sup>88</sup> OECD website: <http://www.oecd.org/edu/highereducationandadultlearning/whoswhoinahelothegovernanceoftheprojectandthevariousgroupsinvolved.htm#Contractors>

cooperation between the two principal contractors as “unfortunate,” adding further context:

But I have to go back to the beginning because the decision was taken at the outset of this exercise, the feasibility study, that we should go into direct negotiations with the CAE to use their instruments, the CLA, for the running of the generic skills strand. That was a separate decision that was taken. We had advice to go with this by the expert groups that were in action before the project was actually started. So it was advice we had, and the GNE took the decision on going into this arrangement with the CAE (interview, OECD/GNE: March 2013).<sup>89</sup>

Within the revised contractual agreement, ACER had overall responsibility for selecting experts and the assessment tools used in the AHELO study. Capitalizing on its previous work with PISA and other ILSAs throughout the Middle East and Asia (see section on AHELO Consortium in Chapter Two), ACER was a natural fit with the OECD project:

The decision to tender to ACER was an open and bona fide process. We were not in doubt that ACER and the consortium were the best bidder. It was quite obvious. We listened to them and two others; we had a hearing with them all and we decided to open negotiations with ACER... also they had managed to put together a very strong consortium. We were quite impressed with the attitude of the whole way they interpreted the study. They still have run the project quite well, but the interface with the CAE was not very well handled. [...] We could

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<sup>89</sup> According to this GNE member tensions between directors of the two principal contractors boiled over into a heated verbal argument at a Paris restaurant and nearly precipitated into a physical altercation.

have lived with the CAE running the generic skills strand with the scoring, the quality assurance system, and delivering the tests; we would have needed it to be integrated into the electronic platform, but the development...the result was that they should have delivered through ACER, which was not a GNE decision (interview, OECD/GNE: March 2013).

Governance literature has recently begun to describe the contests for authority and legitimacy that, on the one hand, conduce to governance architectures and, on the other, provide the basis for their fragmentation (Pouliot, 2020; Zürn, 2018; Sending, 2015; Biermann, 2010). More often, the policy literature describes epistemic communities (Haas, 1992; Hall, 1993) in unproblematic terms, *a priori* assigning expert authority a critical role in guiding policy makers without pausing to interrogate the tensions and contradictions within these communities of knowledge.

AHELO offers an empirical example of the tensions within epistemic communities in global education governance. ACER was selected by the OECD for its lofty reputation in ILSAs and its ability to manage complex international projects. Its applied education research had produced testing instruments for use in varied contexts and within multilevel governance structures, and its MCQ instruments in particular formed an essential part of the generic skills strand of AHELO. Yet the Chair of the GNE framed ACER's competitive and single-minded approach to its terms of reference, in particular its ability to coordinate with other contractors, thusly:

Let me just say three key words: competition - they are competitors... the coordination between ACER and the CAE became very problematic. I said three key words: competition, they should cooperate, but I think that ACER thought the CAE was a competitor, and they wanted to maneuver them out quite bluntly. That was one. The other was I think a different attitude how to measure generic skills, where ACER did not recognize the way that CAE intended to measure generic skills. They did not recognize their method. They thought the method was not... but the OECD has decided on this method, for the purpose of the feasibility study. That was a closed case. But it became obvious they [ACER] didn't consider this to be a valid method. The third key word is personal relations. It's as simple as that. They are different persons. They couldn't communicate very well. I think was simply unprofessional attitudes...in fact they couldn't agree on the description of how the instruments worked... They could have acknowledged each other's methods in the analysis, so I still blame them. I feel it was a question of a stronger and a weaker part (interview, OECD/GNE: March 2013).

Despite its technical reputation, ACER's introduction after the initial contract with CAE had been signed necessitated an acrobatic shift in authority that brought considerable tension to the project. While establishing the AHELO Consortium in 2009, led ultimately by ACER, "was intended to bring significant synergies, additional expertise and benefits to the study, it was done *in full recognition* that some of the Consortium partners might have longer-term conflicting commercial interests" (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 185; emphasis added).

Even as the OECD was aware of these conflicting commercial interests between its two principal contractors, it chose to frame this tension against the backdrop of

“shifting timelines and funding uncertainties,” precipitated in some measure by the financial crash of 2008, that “resulted in less than ideal conditions for negotiating contracts with different parties, and in particular, with the AHELO Consortium, led by ACER, and with CAE” (*ibid.*).

### **From instrumentation design and validation to fieldwork implementation**

The financial crisis, contractual disputes among Consortium partners, and the late addition of some countries to the feasibility study meant that phase one of AHELO - developing testing instruments and contextual background surveys - had to be amended, discarded, or rushed through initial sampling and small-scale validation of testing instruments ahead of AHELO’s implementation in 2011-2012.

*Table 4: Phases of AHELO project design, validation and implementation*

<i>Phase</i>	<i>One</i>	<i>Two</i>
<i>Phases of work</i>	Instrumentation and proof of concept (2010-2011)	Practical implementation and data analysis (2011-2012)

<i>Key date(s)</i>	<p>January 2010: CAE “internationalizes” two of its US CLA instruments (GS)</p> <p>July 2010: consortium adapts economics and engineering strands to Tuning framework</p> <p>February 2011: Consortium contracted for framework and survey instruments for student, faculty and institutional contextual dimension</p>	<p>November 2011 and March 2012: NPMs received training in test administration, sampling, AHELO online platform, national management, procedures to implement testing instruments and surveys;</p> <p>March 2012 to July 2012: actual testing of students and implementation of context surveys</p>
<i>Main achievements</i>	<p>NPMs consulted and approved the CLA-MCQ items; focus groups in various HEIs in each country “pre-tested” and validated each instrument; small scale tests and questionnaires provided Consortium with initial data</p>	<p>AHELO tested 23,000 students and surveyed 4,800 faculty in 248 HEIs;</p> <p>Probabilistic sampling as part of quantitative criteria used to ensure methods and analyses in survey and assessment instruments were cross-nationally valid and comparable; this formed the basis of AHELO’s technical proof of concept</p>
<i>Main challenges</i>	<p>International adaptation of CLA required ACER to oversee a new assessment framework to ensure consensus; commercial conflict</p>	<p>NPMs had little time to consult and translate contextual dimension materials; NPMs had little time for training; NPMs could not verify or validate some data files; CRT portion of GS test was administered through separate computer platform</p>

(Source: adapted from OECD/AHELO, 2012: 89-95).



Table 4 (above) summarizes the key dates, achievements and challenges involved in bringing AHELO from technical design to implementation. The Secretariat identified a third phase, value-added methodologies and approaches (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 95), not included in this table; this phase was highly theoretical and involved discussions among technical and value-added experts about how to reliably capture “learning gain” accrued through HEIs after taking incoming student ability into consideration.

In preparing to implement AHELO in 2012 - and against the backdrop of deeply divisive contracting parties - the Secretariat stressed the importance of reaching technical-political consensus over developing frameworks and interpreting the resulting data:

In order to develop provisional framework with an international scope, reaching international agreement with consultation and review is essential. Cross-cultural comparisons of academic performance require that different countries, and even different HEIs within countries, agree on the definition of the domain to be tested. This is one of the major difficulties with making cross-cultural comparisons (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 107).

The principle challenge facing AHELO’s experts was measuring what was arguably the holy grail in comparative assessment: the value-added provided by universities and higher education institutions, a task so monumental that it was even far above conflicting commercial interests. “Given the complexity of measuring learning gain, the proposed approach was to first establish the feasibility of measuring student learning outcomes at the end of the Bachelor’s degree. Then, consideration would be given to the possibility

and relevance of developing value-added measures in a context like AHELO” (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 95). As one of the more enticing aspects of an AHELO-type instrument, value-added was yet beyond the scope of the feasibility study; its inclusion was therefore pitched as part of an AHELO main study.

National consultations - the integration of NPMs/country representatives to AHELO’s design and implementation - were an essential aspect in ensuring the “goodness of fit” of AHELO. As described above, Tuning provided the methodology on expected learning outcomes in engineering and economics, framing the test questions that were then validated for international use by the Technical Advisory Group (TAG).

This “validated” assessment framework then incorporated the CAE’s Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), which provided the construction-response task questions, and ACER’s MCQ, which provided the other set of questions used in generic skills. The Secretariat observed that such practices incorporating multiple instruments were common in ILSAs, pivoting from earlier pronouncements that multiple instruments would *compromise* the core integrity of each: “Assessment and survey instruments are constructed by either developing entirely new materials created for the specific testing/survey situation, or by using existing instrument(s), or parts of it, possibly with modifications of existing items.” Essentially, the instruments (CLA) and methodology (Tuning) had to be “valid in *as many as possible* institutional and national contexts, e.g., through a cross-national review of assessment frameworks and instruments to check for cultural and linguistic appropriateness... (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 110; emphasis added).

Logically, then, what had been validated and applicable in *some* international contexts was therefore validated and applicable in *all* contexts with the important caveat that such a methodological stretch was permissible for the purposes of a feasibility study.

What the OECD had not fully anticipated was the difficulty in translating and adapting comparative frameworks and testing instruments localized primarily in European (Bologna/EHEA) and North American (CAE) contexts. Budgetary shortfalls compounded by revised contractual timelines meant sacrificing costs associated with training local teams in participating countries.

As part of its AHELO Terms of Reference, teams of local National Project Managers would provide input to the GNE on the translation and local adaptation of testing instruments while providing a point of contact for the different Institutional Coordinators (ICs) who represented individual universities in the study (the AHELO implementation structure is described in detail in Chapter Four).

Exemplifying the challenges in effectively governing a study of this technical magnitude, the National Project Managers from Mexico lamented that calibration for performance tasks (PTs) and multiple choice questions had not been piloted ahead of their use in the generic skills assessment:

So we lost the opportunity to have the pilot to have a stock of real answers from students all around the participating countries to make the process of international calibration [e.g., rendering the comparison meaningful among different countries] with the scorers. The process of calibration had to be made with answers coming

from students of the States. So this is a bias. And another problem is that we were mixing instruments with two very different approaches and very different methodologies and very different conceptions about learning outcomes in the Generic Skills. They were different even in the concept of problem solving and the concept of critical thinking (interview, Mexico NPM, March 2013).

As Chapter Five describes, Mexico's frustrating experiences with AHELO was not unique among participants. Where some countries and systems flourished in implementing AHELO, others did not.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

AHELO was a vision long in the making with institutional support that likened it to a "PISA for higher education." This vision was nevertheless fractured, partial, and premised on finding the "holy grail" of measurement. As such, AHELO's ultimate value-added may have been rooted more in fantasy than in reality. A survey of education experts reinforced an existing methodology, Tuning, to frame the expected/intended learning outcomes in engineering and economics. Yet there was a significant disjuncture between the accepted methodology of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), used so widely in the US context to measure generic skills, and its adaptation for the international domain under the overarching authority of the ACER-led Consortium.

The competing financial and commercial interests of AHELO's two principal contractors were known to the Secretariat, revealing an organizational leadership that may

have indeed been “asleep at the wheel” (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013). Yet these competing commercial interests also underscore the fractiousness of expert/epistemic authority in global governance. Indeed, policy literatures too often ascribe authority to technical expertise without empirically interrogating the contentious struggles for legitimacy that lurk in the shadows of governance architectures.

The global financial crisis of 2008 exacerbated the OECD’s budget for AHELO and ultimately precipitated an unfortunate and largely irreconcilable contractual conflict of interest within the AHELO Consortium. AHELO’s blurred and conflicted technical-managerial governance structure may be regarded against the backdrop of what Mundy and Verger (2015) identify as the organizational crises that occasionally beset the strategic vision of IOs.

The description of AHELO as a “PISA for higher education” in fact obscured the differences between these projects. At the same time as AHELO was gaining policy traction between 2006-2008, the OECD was in fact experiencing serious organizational, budgetary, and strategic challenges that made a comparison with PISA precarious indeed. While PISA was beginning to enjoy widespread policy implementation (43 OECD member and non-member countries participated in the first round of PISA in 2000 and this number increased to 55 in 2006), the higher education file at the OECD was somewhat adrift without any significant organizational support (Harmsen and Braband, 2019).

Systemic country reviews for tertiary education, one of the OECD's flagship programmes at EDU, had been gradually replaced by sectoral and thematic interventions largely sponsored and driven by institutional memberships in the IMHE. Tertiary education projects are largely made up voluntary contributions by institutional members at the OECD, and in some cases come from special budget allocations (Carroll and Kellow, 2011).

The variability of higher education environments, academic programs, and pedagogical commitments made a comparative study daunting from the start; an AHELO-type instrument had to contend with teasing out the national, institutional, and individual “value-added” variables that shaped learning outcomes in order to capitalize on the promise of offering something truly innovative.

AHELO detractors - a chorus of university associations, faculty groups, student unions, Education International, and several authors, scholars, and academics - sounded a deep reservation about “the potential impact on institutional autonomy and academic freedom and fears that AHELO might be forced on institutions, and could over time yield homogenisation and constrain academic freedom” (Dias and Amaral, 2014: 83).

Yet, inarguably, one traces the outline of the OECD's influence in global education by the degree to which the foundation of AHELO's methodological and technical structures were firmly established in regional (Bologna) and international (PISA) education studies, in methodologies and approaches to measurement coproduced

by the OECD, and in the transnational expert communities sustained by the OECD's vast epistemic network.

Indeed, the discursive dissemination of AHELO's scientific feasibility as a holy grail with potential discoveries akin to when Columbus set sail (OECD/EDU: 2007(8): 1) was particularly crucial with respect to convening technical authority for AHELO's cross-national implementation. This was truly a legitimate cause: to pioneer an innovative tool that could make universities more efficient while producing knowledge workers for the knowledge societies that lay just beyond the horizon.

Indeed, AHELO's technical proof of concept speaks to its ability to execute such a large and complex multilevel governance project. The financial crisis was an exogenous shock beyond what the Secretariat could have imagined, necessitating a fundraising campaign that expanded the feasibility study but also requiring an acrobatic back-peddalling of contractual obligations.

AHELO's *practical* feasibility, on the other hand, clearly relied on enrolling a broad base of social-political support as evidenced by its post-haste convening of the Stakeholder's Consultative Group; that the SCG lacked any formal input into the study was logical considering the limited scope of the project. At the same time, it also undercut the Secretariat's ability to secure moral and pragmatic legitimacy from academic communities on behalf of whom this important project was ostensibly launched.

How did the OECD overcome these initial obstacles? In their analysis of AHELO's failure, Harmsen and Braband argue the OECD "was not successful in staking

its epistemic claim to AHELO” because it ultimately failed to obtain expert consensus:

“In designing AHELO, the OECD secretariat followed its conventional approach, seeking to construct a policy problem field in terms that privileged its own pivotal role as the central authority defining both the parameters of the debate and the relevant evidential bases” (Harmsen and Braband, 2019: 11). This observation confirms that “expert” consensus provided but one important source of authority driving the AHELO study - a key observation that distinguishes my approach from the organizational and bureaucratic one adopted by Harmsen and Braband.

Yet Hall (2009) and Grek (2014) remind us that education governance is not only about statistical certainty; it is about enrolling legitimacy into what is fundamentally a political project. “The most important role of indicator sets,” suggests Hall, “may be in framing the issues and defining the problems, rather than suggesting the solutions” (quoted in Grek, 2014: 270).

The empirical evidence presented in this chapter does not suggest the Secretariat was seeking to push a singular solution to the problem of comparative assessment, or even privileging its own position of authority relative to AHELO’s technical development and implementation. Indeed, the Secretariat lacked a coherent and far-reaching strategy for holding contentious contractors accountable while failing to provide stakeholders with a more definitive role in AHELO’s governance.

Centres of global education research (e.g., NIER, CHEPS, ACER and other university-based research centres) emerge in my study as nodes in transnational



knowledge networks theorized in global governance literature (e.g., Porter and Webb, 2008). These networks evidence a global education governance architecture nevertheless fragmented by competing academic and commercial interests.

A more complete empirical picture of how universities themselves are included in this governance architecture pries open heretofore under-theorized terrain. What does implementation of AHELO in different national and institutional contexts reveal of the authority-legitimacy gap in global education? This question frames the empirical case studies in Chapter Five.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLEMENTING AHELO**

To be successful in this new world, universities have to seize opportunities, adjust and adapt, reform and develop. Boards have to make a deliberate choice, whether to manage an institution in the traditional way or to be a driving force for the management of change. By identifying its role as an agent of change the board will set the scene for initiatives in many different levels inside the university (OECD/IMHE, 2006).

The preceding chapter offered an empirical analysis of AHELO's governance drawing on interview data, content analysis of primary OECD documents, and participant observation at two international conferences in September 2012 and March 2013. Chapter Four thus provides an overview of key discourses, technologies and rationalizations by expert authorities in the designing of AHELO within the global education governance field. My dissertation continues to explore this governance field by describing the transition to AHELO's country-level implementation in Ontario (Canada), Mexico and Egypt as a way to gain further insight into novel structures of global education governance.

Implementation demands the participation of key subnational actors in AHELO, including faculty and students within the university environment. Participation - or lack thereof - in AHELO brings into relief the additional sources of legitimacy and authority that contour an emerging global education governance field.

### **Implementing a novel education policy tool**

As AHELO is implemented across the 17 countries and jurisdictions, the analysis shifts from OECD boardrooms, expert committees and conference venues to the 248 universities within which the adapted instruments and surveys are deployed. Of principal interest is the coordination between GNE, the ACER-led Consortium, and the National Project Managers in the implementation of AHELO. Respectively, these groups represent AHELO's political, technical, and managerial oversight at the subnational level. Who takes a leadership role in the national environment? What resources are deployed in pursuit of consolidating authority for global education at the subnational level?

It would be a mistake to understand AHELO's implementation as simply a technical undertaking. AHELO's implementation as a comparative assessment was indeed novel - especially with respect to its ambitious attempt to uncover the value-added dimension of institutional learning - yet its approach to comparative measurement was familiar to PISA participants, hence its analogy as a "PISA for higher education" often repeated in the corridors of the OECD and among interview respondents.

Of the 17 countries and jurisdictions participating in AHELO, all but two (Kuwait and Egypt) had participated in PISA's 2012 and 2009 cycles of testing, and continue to actively participate.<sup>90</sup> The common appeal of PISA and AHELO is "the shared opinion that countries will need to be able to compete in the 'knowledge economy' to assure the economic wellbeing of their citizens;" however, as Grek (2009) has also demonstrated in

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<sup>90</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/pisa-participants.htm> (accessed on March 7, 2022). This parallel is relevant insofar as it points to the way comparative assessments have become programmatically and discursively embedded in the national education policy space.

her analysis of PISA implementation in Germany, Finland and the UK, “[it] is striking that PISA results seem to have been used for sabre-rattling political rhetoric to drive through educational reforms in some of the countries” with others having “clearly suffered shock in reaction to international test results (e.g., France and Norway)” (Baird et al. 2011: 1-2).

The parallel with PISA is therefore instructive for the way comparative assessments travel through education systems in order to initiate, or justify, or challenge policy reforms to education. The neoliberal restructuring of higher education provides the political context within which some AHELO participants, including a faculty member of IMHE, expressed anxieties over the ultimate policy goals of its feasibility study and subsequent main study:

There are many instruments and tools used inside universities - according to national legal regulations you have to measure the quality of all your activities (study programs, quality of teaching, research, performance etc). My question for this is that, for example, if there is a country with such tools of evaluating quality, what are the weaknesses of these tools and the problems induced by the evaluation process? (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013).

Part of the answer to these rhetorical questions were addressed in an informal OECD ministerial meeting chaired by Japan’s Minister for Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology on 11-12 January 2008. It was proposed that

evaluation could only be effective if it was linked to consequences for institutions and individuals and that, because the stakes are high for potential students and

their employers, governments and other stakeholders should pursue and promote their efforts to provide reliable timely information on outcomes and to make this public, noting that such efforts could improve the quality of the evaluation and ranking of higher education institutions by evaluation agencies and external observers in the media or elsewhere (OECD/IMHE, 2008: 7).

Education policy makers across the OECD are fuelling the tremendous pressure that university education needs to “perform” for students, institutions and the economy. Many countries in the AHELO study, including Mexico, framed participation in reference to a systemic evolution toward a more robust “culture of evaluation” (interview, OECD/NPM: March 2013) that promised more accountability measures without specifying to whom institutions would be ultimately accountable:

For me this is important because for the sake of data you try to be precise, but actually in the mentality of people working in higher education institutions you have to create a very biased idea of what this education is about...it’s not only to teach to test, it’s more specifically the idea that we are externally controlled (interview, IMHE member, March 2013).

There is indeed a delicate balance between quality assurance tools that restore public confidence in higher education and the felt recognition that such tools - including those that supplement or supplant existing global rankings - may be used to assert new educational hierarchies: “the creation of standards means there is always a reductive bias, and you are imposing from the centre a hierarchical tool that is not value-neutral” (interview, IMHE member, March 2013).

This sentiment was widely shared among university participants attending the IMHE's conference on 17-19 September 2012, *Attaining and Sustaining Mass Higher Education*, which coincided with the final stages of AHELO implementation (field notes, OECD/IMHE: 19 September 2012). The OECD pushed back against the proposition that AHELO would be so reductive:

The - again it's documented what the nature of the feasibility study was and the reasons, the sorts of questions it was trying to answer - it was contentious from the beginning. I think a lot of the institutions were somewhat suspicious of the motives of government... and said we're concerned about motive, potential impact on autonomy, potential impact on diversity. It was certainly felt that AHELO might lead to standardization, to which my response was well hang on a minute, this is a feasibility study. I can see what you're getting at, but that's 50 years down the track; higher education is changing so fast for other sorts of reasons that that's most unlikely to happen (interview, OECD/EDU: March 2013).

This OECD policy director considered the claims of PISA standardization to be far-fetched, claiming such normative arguments in fact necessitated the feasibility study: "Well, I don't think we have any evidence that national curricula are converging to improve PISA results. So it really was a far-fetched objection. I mean you could see where it was coming from... You got different rectors, presidents of national associations, or members of their board, arguing eloquently the different points of view, which really just confirmed for us the view that the feasibility study was what was needed" (interview, OECD/EDU: March 2013).

Yet it was not entirely clear within IMHE, the locus of institutional authority in the OECD's global higher education governance, that a feasibility study employing a cross-national comparative methodology would necessarily yield the results that universities actually needed to either augment accountability and quality standards or improve upon pedagogical practices.

At times there appeared to be a normative dissonance between the IMHE membership - which included representatives from OECD countries plus Brazil, Latvia and Russia - and participants in the AHELO study, including Egypt, that underscored the fragility of the OECD's global governance in education. For example, Egypt believed that AHELO would produce student-level data that could help their universities understand how well their students "performed."

This expectation may have been the result of seeing the way PISA produced such results and underscored by the portrayal of AHELO as a PISA for higher education. Misperceptions of the study were attributed to national culture and a selective reading by some countries of the study's objectives. This evidently strained relations between country project managers and the OECD:

I think one of the big problems has been managing expectations. I feel like expectations with people – the Japanese issue was a bit different; that was cultural and a bit different – the Egyptian issues that were raised yesterday and that I'm relatively familiar with are all about not really getting what the aim – or thinking that the aims of the project are different to what they are, and somewhere, whether through misinterpretation or listening skills, just not quite realizing...

there were some countries, and Egypt in particular, that thought this project was going to produce meaningful, high quality data for them to make individual student-level results, but certainly institution results and national results. That was never promised and that was never part of the thing. I kind of feel for them, but as with the student tests it was said over and over and over again at every NPM meeting and every GNE meeting this project will not produce student-level results. I would've loved it to, especially from a national project level perspective, that would have been great if it had been built into the design, but it was not built into the design, and like PISA, which only produces national results and does not produce institution-level results, and it certainly doesn't produce student results, *AHELO was always premised on producing institution-level results*.<sup>91</sup> So that was I felt a very clear message that people understood, and it was dealt with many times because there were expectations (interview, AHELO Consortium: March 2013; emphasis added).

Woodward (2009: 64) emphasizes how cognitive governance - "the most elusive but doubtless most important element" - shapes the values and expectations of actors within a governance framework. Heading into phase 2 of AHELO's implementation, it was clear that countries were not on the same page. Moreover, the late addition of Abu Dhabi to the study - mere weeks before the testing was to begin - helped bridge some of the final funding gaps but seemed to strain relations in the Consortium even further (field notes, OECD/IMHE: September 2012).

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<sup>91</sup> This contractor emphasized that AHELO's aim had always been to produce institution-level results, or what was described as the "holy grail" of assessments, namely, the value-added dimension of learning gain. Yet the technical experts convened to discuss the feasibility of capturing this dimension repeatedly emphasized its present unattainability. Was the OECD being duplicitous in its marketing of AHELO simply to bridge funding gaps for the innovative study?



Within the IMHE itself, a lack of confidence in what the OECD could provide in a crowded market seemed to undercut the authority of the study. Senior members of the IMHE attempted to massage the OECD's ability to produce meaningful results for institutions while also managing country expectations:

The OECD are not the only people working in this; a lot of people are – if you are in a country that has well established quality assurance systems, benchmark standards, that puts you in a different position than a country that doesn't have that. There was one country that said that through this process we need more econometrics in our economics - you know, in our curricula. Well, there are other ways for institutions to get that insight without running a detailed survey. And others were saying “the open question” [CRT] approach is a good way of assessment and that led them to think OK, some of our students didn't do that well in this, we think they should be better, so what does that mean about what we should be doing with our pedagogy? Again, you don't need to carry out a survey to get that information (interview, OECD/IMHE, March 2013).

Moreover, other ranking members of IMHE considered AHELO a “fantastic idea” for “the improvement agenda,” but noted that professional bodies - “the serious professional bodies in psychology, in engineering, in business” - seemed to be more effective in embedding learning outcomes in their professional development practices.

The suggestion was that the OECD was nearly obsolete - or at least late to the assessment game. Indeed, private actors were already developing technological tools to test graduates' ability to apply learning in the workplace, filling gaps where government resources were lacking.

In practice and in principle, private actors were competing with government and the OECD in measuring and assessing learning outcomes precisely where the OECD claimed it mattered most - in knowledge workers and in STEM-related professions. Private actors and organizations possessed acumen, technology and social media networks to gain entry into the assessment market.

Emerging private testing companies provide reliable and effective comparative platform to assess disciplinary learning outcomes of interest to particular industries. In this way, savvy education technology companies enter the field as knowledge brokers in the global education governance architecture. A senior member of IMHE neatly summarizes the state of the global education policy field:

If you're a country like Australia or Canada, I think it's really important to have a good arsenal of information on learning outcomes because our students come from everywhere, our graduates go everywhere, already the professional bodies - the serious professional bodies in psychology, in engineering, in business - are embedding learning outcomes. So there will be a lack of coordination for a while, but sooner or later this is going to occur.

I think that students are going to be ahead of institutions and governments here because students already use social media to say exactly what they think about the quality of their experience, and sure it might be short-term stuff, but they have a sense. Employers have an interest in the quality of graduates, and in some countries there's a lot of concern about the quality of graduates.

For example in India, where the very very very top people go to the IIMs, the IITs, as their first preference. Their second preference is for US Ivy League Schools and similar places. But the domestic Indian education system is a

shambles. So, what's going on in India to counteract this? You've got some interesting private players starting to enter the market, and they're interested in - although they're having a political problem getting the universities in - *but you've got knowledge brokers emerging*, people who set up private companies to test the graduates.

So governments have got nothing to do with it; they're making a quid out of it. The most significant of the groups I've come across is a group called Aspiring Minds, who've got their own website. Two brothers, Aggarwal, they do testing of graduates for employers.

*Now, that tells you that the government has lost entire control over the quality of the system when people like that are doing that, and the professions and the employers regard that as more reliable.* So that's where I am conceptually on, and I think it's a great idea (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013).

This (extended) quote from a senior IMHE member speaks to the fractured nature of public-private authority in global higher education. Despite the felt need to incubate the next generation of knowledge workers, national governments seem ill-equipped to identify and measure learning outcomes. Even the OECD seems to be irrelevant in an environment where private firms “do testing of graduates for employers.”

Even as the OECD undertook its most innovative project in higher education its core IMHE members - with extensive policy and university administration experience - seemed to consistently undercut the faith countries may have initially placed in the OECD's epistemic governance.

These comments further emphasized that not all OECD countries and higher education systems possessed such “well established quality assurance systems [and] benchmark standards” evidenced, by the example give above, in Canadian and Australian higher education political economies. Indeed, some national higher education systems are simply not amenable or supportive of the privatization, or re-localization outside of university governance, of educational quality assurance as they are in India where, according to the IMHE member in the interview above, “the domestic Indian education system is a shambles.”

Clearly, underlying some of the tension in comparative assessment projects is a cracked foundation of trust, legitimacy, and competency compounded by incoherent and contradicting messages. “Experience in countries around the world is that quality assurance in higher education is contentious: it needs trust to develop,” claims a senior member of IMHE. “There’s some things you can do to build confidence and to build understanding” (interview, OECD/IMHE, March 2013).

The IMHE board continued to insist that countries and institutions instil confidence behind the purpose, scope and utility of AHELO while deriding senior OECD leadership: “[The] leadership of IMHE was a real problem at the director level. I think [he] was asleep at the wheel. Totally asleep at the wheel. And I had about a year with him...look he’s a nice person, but he has been around a long bloody time and was asleep at the wheel. And this was well and truly beyond him. He didn’t have any idea what was going on” (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013). In summary, conflict within the IMHE

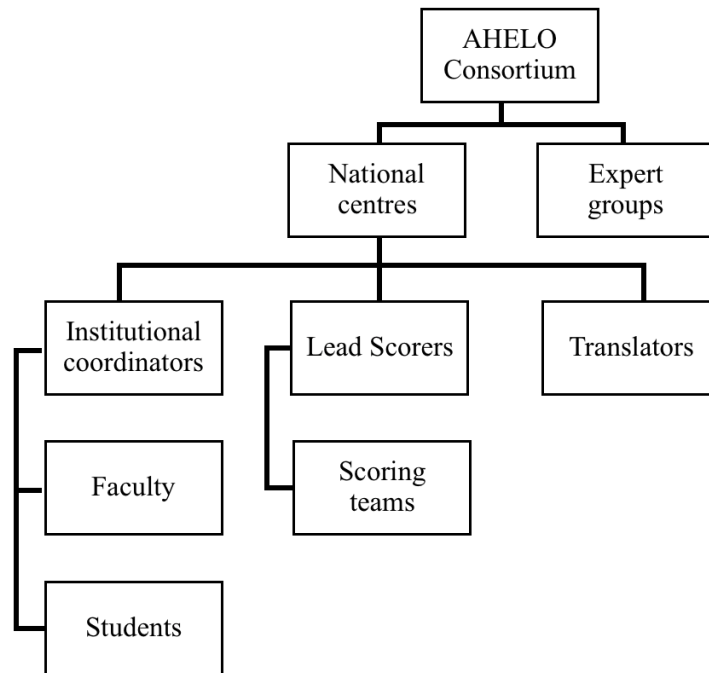
pointed to a fragmented authority at the IO level. Institutional leaders, ostensibly helping steer the feasibility study, railed against the OECD directorship and the “messy” governance of the study. While strategic crises and uncertainties regularly befall the work of IOs (Mundy and Verger, 2015), IMHE representatives seemed to undercut the OECD’s epistemic authority by suggesting private “knowledge brokers” were better positioned to conduct learning outcome assessments. Interview data suggests the OECD was facing a crisis of legitimacy at the strategic heart of AHELO.

### **From study design to cross-national implementation**

This section describes the governance framework for AHELO’s implementation across the 17 higher education systems before delving deeper into the national experiences in Ontario, Mexico and Egypt.

AHELO’s governance structure and Terms of Reference stipulated shared (if not strained) governance between different technical, managerial and political entities that came together in phase two of the feasibility study. National project managers (NPMs), working out of national centres, would be responsible for managing AHELO at the subnational level, coordinating the participation of universities. While the NPMs were clearly designed to centralize technical authority within participating countries, in practice this authority was enabled and contested by the university participants (e.g., students and faculty) themselves.

*Figure 9: AHELO communications structure*



(Source: adapted from OEDCD/2012: 148)

Phase 2 of AHELO was critically important to the study for it would prove the technical feasibility of adapting assessment frameworks, instruments and surveys to an international context and managing a vast cross-cultural sample of students, faculty and institutions. The communications structure, visualized above in Figure 7, was essential to coordinating and implementing this aspect of the transnational study.

Each country nominated a national project manager (NPM), or NPM team, responsible for ensuring AHELO implementation followed policy and operational guidelines established through the locus of authority shared between the Consortium, the GNE and the Secretariat (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 148). NPMs, drawn from national higher education quality councils, university administration, and government ministries,

coordinated the national-level implementation of AHELO and communicated results and progress to the OECD via National Centres (*ibid.*, 203-04).

As such, NPMs were responsible for canvassing and soliciting interest from universities. Recruitment or invitation into AHELO varied by country: Australia's NPM, for example, coordinated recruitment with the Australian government and the Australian Council of Engineering Deans and prioritized those institutions "that had been active participants in previous government-level conversations about the assessment of learning outcomes" (OECD/AHELO, 2013: 49).

Australia is indeed a global leader in education studies of this kind and came to AHELO with a considerable level of knowledge, experience and institutional memory in designing assessment instruments. For other countries, AHELO represented a novel tool in an emerging culture of evaluation. As described in the section below, Mexico's process-oriented approach relied on convening legitimacy at the institutional level in order to enrol universities while Ontario's goal-oriented participation was centrally organized and discipline-specific.

Within this national level governance framework, NPMs were also tasked with recruiting institutional coordinators (ICs) - who were either senior administrators or professors from departments with administrative roles - within universities to oversee the technical infrastructure, testing, and data gathering; training and monitoring lead scorers who, working under the immediate supervision of ICs, aggregated scoring data; and training translators, who were tasked with ensuring that testing instruments were

linguistically and culturally appropriate while adhering to construct validity and reliability of the instruments across all languages.<sup>92</sup>

NPMs thus provided the country-level leadership required to ensure the AHELO study was successfully implemented. However, this leadership was premised on the OECD fulfilling its end of the bargain, namely providing countries with the technical and strategic leadership required to convert technical into practical feasibility.

Yet technical leadership in AHELO was in constant flux, complicating the deployment of AHELO at the subnational level. The Technical Advisory Group (TAG), composed of eight international higher education experts, had an essential role as an Expert Group in advising the GNE and Secretariat on all technical aspects of the study.

The TAG had been under the managerial authority of the Consortium until early 2012 when, owing to the “increasing frequency” with which it addressed policy and implementation questions, its oversight and management shifted to the OECD Secretariat (OECD/AHELO, 2013: 154-55). This shifting of authority had important implications for phase two as the TAG began to offer “mid-course corrections” (*ibid.*) to the assessment instruments developed by the Consortium. For example,

discussions of project operations including reports on contextualising the assessment instruments, training scorers and those responsible for administering the assessments, and early cognitive interviews and try-outs were beginning to reveal more subtle variations in context not captured by the formal survey

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<sup>92</sup> Generic skills constructed-response task questions were especially challenging to implement across languages. See the concluding section of this chapter for discussion of implications for item functioning across countries.



instruments...the process of building the assessment framework in Economics with the assistance of an international expert group in the discipline revealed significant and previously unknown differences in the way the discipline was conceived and taught across different countries (OECD/AHELO, 2013: 156).

While mid-course corrections could be expected from a feasibility study, it nevertheless served to remind that AHELO was an ongoing and evolving exercise in the global governance of education, far from fully conceptualized or technically developed.

Moreover, these early findings brought the technical expertise of the TAG into tension with the adapted assessment frameworks developed by the Consortium in phase one of the study. Although in theory these technical experts were striving toward a proof of concept for the feasibility study design, in practice an element of pride and competition strained the governance of the study further (interview, OECD/GNE: March 2013).

As phase two pushed on, the TAG began to assert more of a technical lead in managing and refining the instruments developed by the Consortium. The TAG insisted that each disciplinary strand include a cognitive assessment for each of the generic skills, economics and engineering frameworks in order to obtain richer descriptive data across the different institutional contexts (OECD/AHELO, 2013: 155) In a 2009 meeting chaired by the TAG, it was agreed that

contextual information is essential during data cleaning and in the calculation of assessment scores - for example in checking the validity of obtained results in the light of particular student or programme characteristics or identifying biased cognitive assessment items for specific groups of students. Experience with the

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), for example, demonstrates that descriptive data about inputs and environments is indispensable [sic] in carrying out these necessary technical tasks. This will be true for AHELO as well (OECD/EDU/GNE, 2009: 3)

In practice, technical feasibility necessitated that all countries collect this contextual data, yet budgetary constraints limited the scope of what could be measured. Late arrivals like Abu Dhabi, who joined the feasibility study mere weeks before implementation in 2012, frustrated attempts by the TAG/OECD to collect this comparative data.

I think some of the people that were concerned about governance at IMHE were also - there was a subtext to that, there was something else they were saying. It would've been something like: I'm an institution and I'm concerned this will become an accountability tool, so I'd like to know if I can stop it. [*Scott: at the faculty level or the administrative level?*] At the administrative level. Although there were faculty that would have found it difficult as well.

[*Scott: so what's an example of something the administration would be concerned about?*]

Would this process produce lead table rankings based on output that is not backed...that would have been the concern of some countries. Others, especially among faculty members, would have had a more philosophical concern about the effects on academic freedom and institutional autonomy; I think some of the countries thought it would give them a much stronger handle on quality by looking at learning outcomes, which if you say it quick enough you can actually

believe that position because really the devil's in the details; really, what is it that it's going to do? How can you sensibly use that?

Indeed, how does the OECD's approach to implementing a learning outcomes instrument vary according to different national jurisdictions and higher education systems? How does AHELO governance scale across varied linguistic and cultural contexts represented in this dissertation by Ontario, Mexico, and Egypt?

### **AHELO in Ontario**

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) joined the AHELO study in 2011 as the agency on behalf of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MCTU) of Ontario and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) - the latter being the Canadian representative to the OECD's education work.

Nine out of 10 Ontario universities with civil engineering programs participated in the feasibility study, "representing approximately 61% of all Canadian civil engineering graduating students" and approximately 90% of graduating civil engineering students in Ontario (Lennon and Jonker, 2014: 3-10).

Higher education in Ontario had a long history of discipline-specific assessment and accreditation. Canadian engineering programs had converged around the Washington Accord, signed in 1989, which aimed to integrate learning outcomes in engineering disciplines through North America, paralleling initiatives developed through the OECD

and European Commission that culminated with the Bologna Declaration in 1999 and the European Higher Education Area.<sup>93</sup>

In both contexts the aim of these accords was to develop evidence-based standards in learning outcomes that could provide academic mobility (e.g., articulation and degree parity) as well as signal student autonomy within a dynamic and internationalized labour market. Furthermore, Statistics Canada had long been integral to the development of the OECD's ILSA regime originating with the first cross-national survey in the early 1990s. Ontario's higher education political economy had therefore converged around some of the OECD principles in higher education accreditation and management.

For instance the participation of most of Ontario's civil engineering departments was indeed consistent with the evolving outcomes-based criteria for "graduate attributes"<sup>94</sup> that had been the focus of the Canadian Engineering Accreditation Board (CEAB) since 2003. By May-June 2015, the CEAB had updated its accreditation for graduating engineers to include the 12 graduate attributes established by Engineers Canada (CEAB, 2015).

Indeed, one of the main reasons spurring participation from Ontario's civil engineering faculties is the felt need to integrate engineering learning outcomes into

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<sup>93</sup> <https://engineerscanada.ca/accreditation/the-washington-accord>

<sup>94</sup> Graduate attributes are defined by the CEAB as "generic characteristics, specified by the Accreditation Board, expected to be exhibited by graduates of accredited Canadian engineering programs at the time of graduation" (CEAB, 2015: 7). Engineers Canada stipulates the following graduate attributes: Knowledge base; problem analysis; investigation; design; use of engineering tools; individual and team work; communication; professionalism; impact on society and the environment; ethics and equity; economics and project management; and life-long learning. Outcomes assessment is only part of the process of accreditation (Engineers Canada, 2015: 4-5).

broader professional development. Yet Ontario's participation risks obscuring the fact that AHELO is not simply about the integrity or purpose of technical assessments; these discipline-specific measures in Ontario must be considered alongside the evolution of the province's higher education quality assurance landscape more generally.

Since the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV) initiated the University Undergraduate and Graduate Degree-Level Expectations (DLE) framework in 2005, there has been a great deal of attention paid to developing evidence-based quality assurance tools in universities across the province. Learning outcome models are central to this effort. By June 2008, "OCAV's adoption of the Degree Level Expectations set out the academic standards of Ontario's universities. Each university is expected to develop its own institutional expression of the undergraduate and graduate [DLEs] and to have them applied to each academic program."<sup>95</sup>

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), and the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA) are some of the many agencies and organizations exploring the role of learning outcomes in Ontario's quality assurance framework for higher education. Added to these agencies are the plethora of "institutional expressions" for measuring learning outcomes at the departmental or program level. The University of Guelph, for example, requires graduates to complete a "learning outcomes

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<sup>95</sup> <https://oucqa.ca/resources-publications/history-of-quality-assurance-in-ontario/>

based portfolio” that showcases their autonomy and competency for preparing to enter an increasingly borderless engineering profession.<sup>96</sup>

In April 2012, just as AHELO began testing in Ontario and 16 other global jurisdictions, the *Symposium on Learning Outcomes Assessment: A Practical Guide* (April 12-13, 2012) took place in Toronto. Co-sponsored by the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQSA), OUCQA and HEQCO, this symposium “featured plenary sessions and hands-on workshops for...international and local university and college faculty, deans, senior administrations and others involved in assessment of learning outcomes.”<sup>97</sup>

A dominant theme in this symposium was the international dimensions of education policy. Hamish Coates, director of ACER, the lead contractor for AHELO, paused his management of the feasibility study to attend this important symposium. Drawing on an OECD-like maxim “to do more, better, with less,” Coates’ presentation emphasized the way “evidence-based management tools” acted like a “circuit-breaker to assure the quality of assessment data” in higher education policy making.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> This project was showcased as part of University of Guelph’s symposium presentation in April 2012 can be found here: <https://oucqa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Warren-Stiver-and-Peter-Wolf-Program-Outcomes-The-Dawning-of-a-New-Era-for-Higher-Education-Presentation-April-12-20121.pdf>

<sup>97</sup> <https://oucqa.ca/event/symposium-on-learning-outcomes-assessments-a-practical-guide/>

<sup>98</sup> Coates’ presentation can be accessed here: <https://oucqa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Hamish-Coates-Measuring-Student-Learning-for-Policy-and-Planning-Presentation-April-13-20121.pdf>

Coates' presentation was one of several - including one by ACER's rival, CAE - that described the integration of "evidence-based management tools" across the pedagogical and policy landscape in Ontario (and beyond). While the symposium showcased a range of innovative ideas and existing practices in the quality assurance and assessment landscape, it also suggested the extent to which performance-based education data formed the foundation of Ontario's evolving higher education policy environment.

Yet there is more to learning outcomes than performance- or incentives-based policy measures; there is a mobility conferred by this assessment architecture. The Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT, 2015) thus takes a different perspective on the assessment of higher education learning outcomes and the reforms such a tool entails. ONCAT regards learning outcomes as "an essential tool for making a system-wide improvement in student mobility and educational opportunities" (ONCAT, 2015: 2). Learning outcomes provide another basis to compare credentials at the course level when students wish to transfer between degree programs - especially important when considering the articulation from one program to another in an adjacent discipline.

At the same time we see how such an assessment process draws in multiple stakeholders: "When discipline experts from various institutions, sectors, and jurisdictions come together to discuss their subject area through a learning outcomes lens, they gain greater understanding of what is expected of students in each program. The clarity and trust that results from such work enables partners to more confidently build partnerships and pathways among programs and institutions, which ultimately expedites

the often lengthy and complex articulation process” (*ibid.*). Conceivably, universities and colleges can further develop internationalization strategies by developing shared learning outcomes-based approaches within and between disciplines. This articulation model indeed opens up Ontario universities and colleges to a more competitive global position in the lucrative academic marketplace.<sup>99</sup>

While few would disagree that university graduates should demonstrate key learning outcomes related to (cross) disciplinary practices, Harvey Weingarten, CEO of HEQCO and co-director of the NPM team for Canada at AHELO, laments the quality of Canadian higher education, pointing out that Ontario university graduates are falling well below OECD standards.

In a CBC article from October 2021, Weingarten opines: “We have research studies that show that perhaps one in four...maybe one in five students in the Ontario college and university system are graduating with literacy and numeracy levels that do not meet what the OECD [...] regards as basic standards.”<sup>100</sup> Weingarten adds that “30 to 40 per cent of students ‘show no demonstrable change or improvement in critical thinking in the first two years of their education’.”<sup>101</sup> These expert opinions reinforce a perception that university education fails to “deliver” expected returns on public investment. AHELO

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<sup>99</sup> My future research will focus on how Ontario colleges and universities are refining their internationalization strategies to reflect shared learning outcomes.

<sup>100</sup> Accessed online on October 15, 2021: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/why-universities-are-failing-to-prepare-students-for-the-job-market-1.6208196>

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.* Weingarten’s comments indicate that value-added methodologies - those “holy grail” methods capturing the value of learning - sought by the OECD have, in fact, been circulating among OECD education policy experts since the conclusion of AHELO’s feasibility study.



thus emerges as an accountability tool that ensures university education meets “basic standards” established by the OECD while suggesting that such global standards are sufficient to ensure a return on higher education investment (in the Ontario context).

This internationalized policy landscape through which learning outcomes are developed in the Ontario higher education system points to potentially competing claims over what a tool like AHELO in fact represents. Proposed changes to Ontario’s university funding model (OCUFA, 2015) provides an alarming backdrop to AHELO’s potential impact on quality assurance mechanisms underlying an evidence- and performance-based approach to systemic higher education reform in Ontario.

Conceivably, AHELO’s project design would allow policy makers to assess institutional performance and address “questions related to cost-effectiveness [of] increasing investments in higher education” (OECD/AHELO, 2013b: 9). Learning outcome data emerging from this “multi-dimensional quality space” could potentially be used to justify reductions or drastic changes to budgetary allocations that invariably affect learning gain - what OCUFA artfully describes as “harmful policy proposals masquerading as innovations” (OCUFA, 2015: 1).

In response to the new funding formula announced in 2015, OCUFA warned that quality higher education depended on the kind of transparency and consistency in allocations that performance-based models threaten to radically undercut (*ibid.*, 3). The benchmarking of Ontario universities against global peers further removes the steering of education in Ontario one step further toward governance at a distance (Rinne, 2020).

Despite its decades-long evolution toward integrating learning outcomes more firmly in a quality assurance and accreditation framework, the Ontario NPM team initially struggled with “low-stakes” testing:

Generally, student recruitment for low-stakes testing is extremely challenging. It is time consuming in both the advertising (posters, emails, class visits, etc.) and in the organizing of test sessions. Furthermore, it can become expensive when students are provided with material incentives, financial or otherwise. Despite the challenges of student recruitment, the institutions were very creative in their strategies and found it to be quite rewarding to see their students participate (Lennon and Jonker, 2014: 14).

From February to June 2012, the Ontario NPM team administered the AHELO engineering test to 443 final-year students and gathered survey data for 155 faculty across nine universities. Although the internationalized assessment frameworks were deemed methodologically robust after phase two validation through focus groups (OECD/AHELO, 2013), sampling biases rendered the tests “unrepresentative at both the institutional and jurisdictional level” (Lennon and Jonker, 2014: 15). These biases were due to the purposive sampling methods used in order to attain the targeted 50% response rate threshold from participants - a key goal of the feasibility study (OECD, 2012: 165).

Further, university ethics protocols required each institution to obtain individual ethics approval prior to testing students, requiring institutions “to quickly modify the assessment framework to reduce the institutional capacity to link the AHELO results to

individual student level data” (*ibid*). This compounded the problem of generating meaningful cohort data for the study.

In addition to student and institutional sampling biases the NPMs faced considerable challenges enrolling student test-takers, further mitigating against meaningful test results. Institutional coordinators from each university attempted to recruit students through personalized emails, departmental or classroom presentations, personal meetings with faculty members, a designated website where students could sign up for the exams, and through promotion at student (engineering society) events (Lennon and Jonker, 2014).

In addition, ICs incentivized students to participate by offering a combination of cash prizes and gift cards (\$25-\$100), a chance to win an iPad, vouchers for an end-of-term dinner, and charitable contributions to engineering clubs and societies. Faculty were recruited through meetings, emails, and individual contact; no cash or other incentives were provided to faculty members (*ibid.*).

Table 4.1 reveals the participation rates for students and faculty across these nine universities.

*Table 5: Ontario university participation rates for students and faculty*

Ontario institutions	Student test-takers/ population	Faculty survey respondents/ population
Institution 1	61/77 (79.2%)	2/18 (11.1%)
Institution 2	23/34 (67.6%)	18/20 (90%)

Institution 3	87/137 (63.5%)	17/18 (94.4%)
Institution 4	57/100 (57%)	16/18 (88.9%)
Institution 5	64/114 (57%)	25/34 (73.5%)
Institution 6	43/90 (47.8%)	27/40 (67.5%)
Institution 7	45/77 (58.4%)	19/32 (59.4%)
Institution 8	26/44 (59.1%)	15/18 (83.3%)
Institution 9	35/56 (62.5%)	16/17 (94.1%)
Total	442/729 (60.6%)	155/215 (72%)

(Source: Lennon and Jonker, 2014)

Notwithstanding the outlier at Institution 1 (where faculty were recruited through individual contact only; cf. Lennon and Jonker, 2014), relatively high faculty participation rates reveal that Ontario's civil engineering faculty felt keenly invested in this study and willing to provide input into a process deemed essential to the integration of graduate attributes in course material and, more generally, to the conversation around Ontario's funding formula and its impact on engineering faculty envelopes.

In contrast, the relatively low rates of student participation (even controlling for more substantial prizes; cf. Lennon and Jonker, 2014) seemed related to timing: AHELO overlapped with end-of-term assignments and exams and students likely felt overburdened by writing yet another set of tests. Moreover, while AHELO was indeed novel for its transnational dimension, degree learning expectations had, by 2012, become integrated in most engineering programs. The CEAB's 2015 updates to graduate attributes

in engineering accreditation augmented and formalized an existing set of criteria that had been established in engineering disciplines since 2003 (and in the case of University of Guelph since 1989).

The OECD (2012: 190) noted the challenge of developing sampling frames that could produce reliable student response rates:

The timely provision of an appropriately detailed and verified unit-record student frame is a critical element of a sample-based approach to ensure the integrity of study outcomes and results and to allow the estimation of confidence intervals. Yet the feasibility study showed that most countries and institutions found this a challenging task and clearer definitions and better protocols for developing sampling frames and managing exclusions were needed.

Indeed, student participation is foundational to the “evidence-based management” (Coates, 2012) approach anchoring of a comparative assessment regime to education policy change: How will the OECD generate meaningful data on learning outcomes without the participation of learners themselves? Whether Ontario’s engineering graduates opposed AHELO for less pragmatic reasons is an empirical question beyond the scope of this dissertation.

The primary purpose of the feasibility study was to build an institutional framework for reliably collecting cross-national student data on measuring learning outcomes; normative questions concerning the student learning experience was incidental and marginal to the study’s design. Had students felt that they were more than data points in a cross-national study participation rates may have been better.

Ontario's AHELO experience led to discussions of similarities and differences among "like-minded" systems with Australia and Japan, who were keen to compare their own experiences in the absence of reliable AHELO data. Because of AHELO's limitation in generating comparable student results, Ontario pursued a memorandum of understanding with Australia and Japan to pool test data and compare their own results of the study for the engineering strand. The purpose of this sub-network, summarized in an "inter-jurisdictional report," was to "gain deeper insight" into the institutional characteristics that "that may impact student success regardless of jurisdictional boundaries" (Lennon and Jonker, 2014: 16).

The networks and conversations prompted by AHELO indeed offer an ideal policy learning environment to explore opportunities for meaningful system-level understanding of how student experiences differ across the (advanced liberal democratic) world. Arguably, such comparative research also helps national agencies refine quality assurance mechanisms that seek greater return on investment offered, in part, by assessing the impact of "traditional" or prevailing inputs on student learning outcomes.

The conclusion at the end of this chapter discusses the implications of this form of transnationalism within global education governance.

### **AHELO in Mexico**

We in Mexico work with many handicaps - very big handicaps. And the institutions are afraid that the results of these evaluations were just rank or benchmark in a simple way and having many critiques that things are not

working, again we are under the standards, teachers and professors are not what we expected, etc. etc. But this, in a context of simplistic evaluation. Of course, there are fears and critiques about trying to compare internationally; there are points of view that do not trust in the government. So everything is in the context that Mexico is a big country and we have many universities and many subsystems. Of course, this is a complex context. From where comes the enthusiasm? Well, it comes from the universities that decided to participate, from the universities that were interested and took the decision to participate. They see there is a trend and it is better to learn from this trend rather than just pretending that this trend does not exist (interview, Mexico NPM: 19 September 2012).

Mexico acceded to the OECD in 1994 and, within 10 years, the federal government initiated systemic reforms to Mexico's vast higher education policy environment. The tensions involved in this process were revealed during the IMHE conference on *Attaining and Sustaining Mass Higher Education* (17-19 September 2012), which coincided with with the final phase of AHELO country implementation and just ahead of the major AHELO debrief in March 2013.

The conference centred on the significant challenges of meeting soaring demand for higher education while reducing costs and improving accountability. This context informed AHELO's policy relevance for countries, like Mexico, with big, autonomous universities that may have been especially resistant to government-led reform efforts.

Predictably, perhaps, Mexico's experience with AHELO differed markedly from that of Ontario's despite their common membership in the OECD. For Mexico, the feasibility study neither complemented existing learning outcome models nor integrated

degree level expectations into professional accreditation; rather, Mexico's participation was emblematic of a "paradigm shift" in higher education system intended to "[build] new institutional knowledge and more assessment capacities for improvement" (OECD/AHELO, 2013a: 112). AHELO would feature as an important step in this policy learning environment.

By estimates provided by Mexico's National Project Management team,<sup>102</sup> only 20% of Mexican students aged 20-24 were able to access fully-subsidized public higher education programs between 2000-2010 (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013) - an indictment of the government's ability to meet demand.<sup>103</sup> The growth of private, for-profit education solved part of the "access" problem but introduces a host of new issues, including educational quality, accountability, and governance (interview, Mexico NPM: 19 September 2012). Mexico, like so many countries around the world, is experiencing a surge in the private delivery of higher education without the accountability and governance frameworks in place to ensure that certificates, diplomas, and degrees issued by these private institutions meet the same levels of quality as public institutions (*ibid.*).

While contending with a growing deregulated private education industry, the Government of Mexico simultaneously instituted significant reforms to public

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<sup>102</sup> Mexico's National Project Management team was comprised of six senior faculty and administrative personnel from Universidad de la Guadalajara, Universidad Autonoma de Yucatan, and Universidad Autonoma de San Luis Potosi. The Ministry of Education (Secretaria de Educacion / Direccion General de Educacion Superior Universitaria) joined the NPM team in the AHELO National Centre and provided financial support and policy advice (cf. OECD/AHELO, 2013a: 117-18; 202-03).

<sup>103</sup> Elite interviews with Mexico's national project management team took place at OECD conferences in Paris from 17-19 September 2012 and again from 11-12 March 2013.



universities beginning in 2000 that the NPM team described as a “paradigm shift” for the way it permitted the growth of a new form of institutional autonomy in Mexico’s big, independent universities (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013):

From 2000, the Mexican government had two tools to get influence in the HE system. One was budgeting and the other was the accountability system. The quality assurance system was created in a way of external evaluation by the Inter-Institutional Committee for the Assessment of Higher Education (ICEAS). There was also the creation of the Agency of National Evaluation. It prepares the general test for graduates. In 2004-2005, there emerged accreditors, also external... So the culture of evaluation has changed absolutely in about 10 years. We had a turn, a paradigm shift, through the accountability in evaluation of quality (interview, Mexico NPM, March 2013).

Mexico looked to the OECD for guidance in not only institutionalizing novel quality assurance mechanisms but in mapping the problématique to help build national consensus for reform.

At the IMHE conference in September, 2012, Mexico’s NPMs hinted at some of the cross-cutting issues that faced the Mexican higher education system. In a written note, the NPMs described challenges ranging from social and gender inequality; the role of technology in providing unprecedented access to a growing cohort of students; the proliferation of private, non-accredited institutions; and the Mexican government’s “very instrumental and short-term approaches” to improving education quality. “The challenges are very big,” concluded one respondent (field notes, OECD/IMHE: 19 September 2012).

The short-term approaches referred to traditional inputs and processes (funding, materials, teaching resources, etc.) that had been the *de facto* approach in Mexico, as in many systems, for trying to improve quality. Yet the data on how these inputs impacted learning was missing.

For the Mexico NPM, the value of AHELO was its outcomes-based approach that considered the role contextual variables played in a more well-informed policy environment led, in part, by the universities themselves (OECD/AHELO, 2013a: 113). For in Mexico, the higher education context (social and gender inequality, technological gaps, etc.) was indeed a dynamic and rapidly evolving set of policy problems that posed major challenges to the central government.

The Government of Mexico did not want - or could not risk the political capital - to spearhead an innovative study that considered this broad and contentious contextual dimension. Instead, the government seemed content to devolve this task to the epistemic authority of the OECD, and to allow the big public universities to assume the risk - effectively transferring responsibility to the supra- and sub-national levels to test the viability of these outcome measures.

Institutions themselves were risking political capital in order to become more innovative, which is what the Mexican authorities had effectively mandated through the creation of quality assurance frameworks in 2004-05. The NPM team elaborates on the role of their universities in these initiatives to bring AHELO's proof of concept into Mexico's higher education system:

All these mechanisms of evaluation had emerged for governmental initiatives with entities quite close to government and they were centred basically on inputs and processes as conditions of operation or implementation - in the ministry - but not centred in the results. Inputs and not outcomes. So AHELO comes in this context of more freedom of evaluation in higher education but in which HEIs feel more ready for this new task. The difference is that from the beginning what happened is that a group of [3] universities led this AHELO project among other universities and this is the reason why universities trust in the project AHELO because there are peers working in this. It's not the instructions of the government (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

AHELO was thus conceived in the Mexican context as a policy tool that could link individual institutions within a national quality assurance framework. The big, autonomous universities essentially became the initial testing grounds for Mexico's system-wide reforms:

So that's why in this culture of evaluation we find mature institutions open in these kind of situations. The point is that we are ready for this new approach because we know from this evolution we are now ready for a more innovative approach. The universities, *they want to be the protagonists of their own evaluation process*. Having in mind that they have to be accountable, AHELO gives the opportunity to have evaluation for institutions that also serves accountability. (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013; emphasis added).

Here the concept of autonomy was used to describe how the government of Mexico delegated a leadership role for Mexico's largest public universities under centralized federal management and tightly controlled quality assurance processes.

The NPM team took pains to describe how the “government is not the leader of the process. But there is an agreement between the government and the three universities, the Rectors (Presidents) of these universities, in which they say, ‘OK are we ready to do this AHELO project, do you think that we can get good results?’ So the government, through the [Ministry of Education]...they [she names two people that used to work in the Ministry] made this agreement with the Presidents of these three universities, and they leave to these universities all the trust for them to lead the project (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).”

This effort by the Mexican NPM thus relied on soliciting support and convening institutional legitimacy across Mexico’s higher education system. The specific role of these “mature institutions” indeed marks a crucial distinction in Mexico’s governance of AHELO: universities emerge as key political actors legitimated by the state and supported - at least initially - by the OECD.

The IMHE had provided Mexico’s NPM team with a crucial locus of legitimacy for mobilizing institutional support for an innovative study spearheaded by its (three) most prestigious universities:

The OECD has the IMHE in which the universities go along with the government. So the HEIs that are the most important in Mexico are the public institutions, they concentrate more than half of the student population; they have a big importance in the decisions of the HE system. If another organization made this call, or the OECD acted without the IMHE, it would not be the same... (interview, Mexico NPM: September 19, 2012).

Through its AHELO feasibility study, the OECD - more precisely the IMHE - had the unique opportunity to empower Mexico's public universities to enact innovative new strategies to bring much-coveted policy reforms to its higher education system. Mexico joined the AHELO feasibility study with expectations that data could be used to improve institutional performance, bringing their universities into line with the new culture of evaluation in Mexico.

*Table 6: Mexico university participation rates for students and faculty*

	AHELO strand		
	Generic skills	Engineering	Economics
Students sampled	2472	825	541
Students tested	1842	678	402
Response rate (%)	75	82	80
Faculty surveyed	400	366	217

(Source: (OECD/AHELO, 2013a: 118)

Fourteen universities and 2,472 students participated in all three testing strands of AHELO (OECD, 2013: 112), testimony to Mexico's determination to obtain a complete range of data across as many disciplines as possible. The OECD's epistemic authority in global education was a decisive factor in Mexico's ability to convene authority for institutional participation in AHELO, and this may have been reflected by the relatively high rates of student participation across all disciplinary strands. The IMHE in particular

afforded Mexico the opportunity for a recognized and legitimate institutional voice to reflect/effect ongoing reforms. The IMHE's authority to convene institutional authority was critical in this regard because

the institutions wouldn't feel like they had the opportunity to participate and the opportunity to take decisions; they [the institutions] wouldn't have an identity as part of the process and in taking the decisions [otherwise]. So the most important thing for this situation is not properly the organization [OECD], but the context, the call, the way the organization is waiting for these learning outcomes results, and mainly, the way in which the HEIs can take part in a project like this (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

Benchmarking higher education learning outcomes in Mexican universities would complement existing "mechanisms of evaluation" that centred on "inputs and not outcomes" (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

There was indeed a strong element of policy emulation in the Mexican experience. The NPM strategy for AHELO was to enrol the top public universities (Universidad de la Guadalajara, Yucatan, and San Luis Potosi) and to thereby attract and recruit some of the smaller universities into the study on the basis of the credibility conferred to the NPM from these more prestigious schools:

The first decision that was made at the very beginning of the project was that the three universities from the state were leading this project, and this was because there is a story of centralization in this country. So the idea was that these three universities were in front, taking charge of the project. This shifted the trust in public universities from the state, and also alleviated suspicions from other

universities that were invited to participate but not as leaders...So this is a different way to do the things, and this is why AHELO comes in a good moment. The timing, context, and evolution is perfect (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

Here the language of accountability used by the Mexican NPM connotes trust and legitimacy, underscoring the cognitive dissonance experienced by some AHELO countries with respect to how “autonomy” and “accountability” were concepts deployed the OECD in reference to evidence-based policy decisions. There was a sense that larger universities were accountable to their smaller and less prestigious counterparts. The NPM team perceived the accountability and budgetary reforms as a democratizing project, bringing robustness, transparency and accountability to a higher education system that had “very big handicaps” (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

However, Mexico’s NPM had inflated expectations of what AHELO would accomplish. They were optimistic that student-level data could improve teaching performance and complement ongoing reforms. The adaptation of the Tuning-AHELO disciplinary frameworks in engineering and economics, and the internationalization of the CLA’s generic skills questions, were validated in Mexico through initial phase two sampling and focus groups (OECD/AHELO, 2013; interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

This early work suggested, perhaps, that the study would provide Mexico with implementable tools at the conclusion of AHELO. Indeed, at this stage the Mexican NPM

team was “really happy with the coordination of the OECD. The Mexican team was working with the OECD really close, and in general terms the relationship with the consortium, with both the contractors [ACER and CAE] was really good” (interview, Mexico NPM, March 2013). This spirit of cooperation would soon disintegrate, casting a dark shadow over Mexico’s experience with AHELO and the IMHE.

Where Mexico experienced serious complications was in the final phase of data analysis, where it seemed like the ACER consortium either lost interest or failed to make adequate time with the NPM team.<sup>104</sup> One of the project managers aptly described working with the AHELO consortium as an inverted funnel where cooperation and coordination gradually diminished as time constraints exerted enormous pressures on the NPMs to interpret the results of the tests and surveys:

What happened is that in this first period we had enough time to make translation and cultural adaptation of the instruments; then we have less time for implementation, scoring, and analysis - the phase of implementation in general. We had also translated the contextual dimension instrument. And also in this part I want to add that we had more consensus - more reflection and more international consensus about everything (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

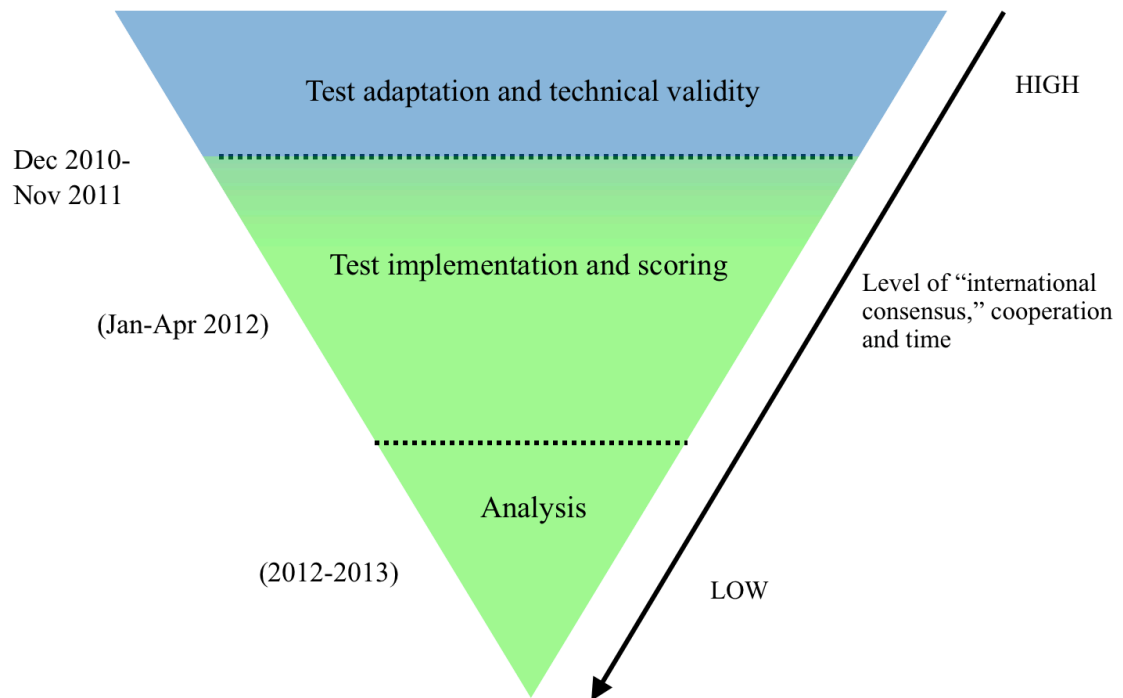
Here I probed the NPM about the nature of cooperation and achieving consensus in the design of the tests and surveys.

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<sup>104</sup> There was a very clear feeling among the different interview participants that ACER really had no time for the country representatives, who were represented by the IMHE and the GNE.



Figure 8: “inverted funnel” of AHELO implementation (Mexico)<sup>105</sup>



At the “top” of the funnel (near the start of the study) there were important conversations “about the goals of the AHELO and the technical aspects” taking place between the experts and the NPMs, and between the NPMs and institutions in Mexico: “we had nine national meetings with these universities, so the way in which we were working with these universities at the beginning of the process was very enthusiastic because they were learning and they were giving feedback” (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

<sup>105</sup> This is a digital reproduction from a notebook diagram produced by one member of the NPM team when discussing the different stages of cooperation with the OECD.

Moreover, the adaptation of the CLA Generic Skills instrument to the Mexican higher education environment initially achieved a high degree of cooperation and coordination:

What happened is that the CAE showed us about 12 PTs [performance tasks] previously designed, so we agreed with, we analyzed, and we decide in this workshop which PTs could fit in an international context. So we had this debate, coming and going and back, about ‘no this is not good because this... in my country...and so on.’ And in the end we decided to have two PTs. And then we have this very long phase for translation and cultural adaptation under the guidelines from CAE, which are really good. We had a very careful processor of translation and cultural adaptation. We had not only the translation but also cognitive labs in which students came and showed that they were able to understand what they had to do, and they were able to respond to the PT. And so it was beyond the simple ‘just take this and implement it.’ It was a big analysis around all these processes (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

However, several problems begin to emerge as the feasibility study struggles with revised contractual arrangements and sharply limited time and budget:

Then we had, as the time goes on, we had less time to be involved in all these important decisions, so we had little time for preparing the scores, and then we had at the very end we had no time, no time, zero time, for analyzing the results. OK. So, why this is important for us is because we had no time to report the results for the Mexican case. Because also the way in which the ACER consortium delivered information was not the most appropriate - we lost much time trying to interpret what they should have been saying in an explicit way (interview, Mexico NPM, March 2013).

Ultimately, the Mexico delegation was disillusioned with the AHELO study and felt cheated from a process in which they worked hard to enrol academic allies. Rather than leading the way in policy learning, helping to adapt AHELO's sensitive tools to Mexico's dynamic and rapidly evolving quality assurance and accountability landscape, "at the end of the project we were only the test applicators. It was like in a moment we changed from this conceptual part in which we were learning and planning and taking decisions, and so on, to this other in which we have very little margin for taking important decisions on the project" (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

The sense of betrayal extended to the national environment, where it seemed the NPM team had lost considerable face:

These kinds of decisions that were taken at the last moment - for somebody, not for the GNE - are the decisions that are making us, the universities, in trouble with the rest of the universities that wanted to participate because they trusted in us. They could feel from us if they were used just like they were used by the government in past times, so we don't want this to happen. Like our colleague from Slovakia said, "we don't even have the results from our own students! Why?" This was not a decision of the GNE. These kinds of decisions that were taken at the end of the project are generating this feeling of being used as applicators and we have to deal with this. We recently had to send mail to the highest participant explaining why the results haven't been delivered and what are we going to do in the next steps so as to not lose the confidence of the universities (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

Much of Mexico's frustration had to do with the tactless way the OECD handled the politics of communication between central governance authorities - especially the GNE - and the NPM team. AHELO's Terms of Reference spelled out the GNE's limited term engagement and, thus, its limited *political* engagement. This upset and confounded some of the countries involved because they felt abandoned at the precise moment where they were required to make policy sense of the (limited) data generated through the feasibility study:

The problem is that ACER did not see his job as international coordination, just as technical. So not as taking leadership in this - just finish the job and here, take this, and we leave you. And the problem was that at the same time the GNE was finished; so we came here, no more GNE, no more nothing! So we don't even have any response from ACER. We mailed them to ask for some clarifications on the information they sent, but they only respond that we need to ask the OECD personnel because we already finished our contract. From my point of view, if I may add something, there is not good thinking and incentives in economic way, it's not good to have two different consortiums – it's not a good idea (interview, Mexico NPM: March 2013).

There was clearly a problem of communicating the purpose and the outcome of the feasibility study to some country participants, including Mexico who, in turn, viewed the study through their own rose-tinted glasses. It was made quite clear from the outset that AHELO would not be producing student-level data because of the sampling biases

and other technical problems with obtaining valid student results; the goal of the study, seemingly lost to many of the participants, was that of technical and practical feasibility.

Following reforms in 2004-05, the politics of education in Mexico conferred a new kind of autonomy to the “mature institutions” who spearheaded the AHELO study in hopes of introducing innovative reforms to the quality assurance environment. The comparative learning outcomes model developed by the OECD and steered through the governance of the IMHE gave Mexico’s universities a central role in enacting this important change amid unprecedented growth in higher education enrolment. Indeed, AHELO’s implementation in Mexico reveals the central role for universities in the sub-national diffusion of global education programmes.

Mexico’s inclusion as a within-unit case in this dissertation presents an illustrative example of the variability among OECD states in adopting and adapting novel cultures of evaluation to a dynamic higher education policy landscape informed, in part, by the political agency of its public universities. In Mexico, the global governance of education brought into sharp relief the potential for large national universities to coalesce around shared policy goals spearheaded by those very institutions; the delegation of authority to these universities in an important transnational study points to novel terrain for education politics within the global education policy field. A governance fields approach emphasizing “relational authority” (Sending, 2015) would situate the political agency of university actors alongside that of the OECD, that of quality assurance agencies, and that

of expert/technical authorities. The Mexican example illustrates that universities can mobilize legitimacy as a way to assert political agency in global education.

The following section examines AHELO's implementation in Egypt, a non-OECD country. How does AHELO's technical implementation intersect with structures of political authority in a non-OECD state? This within-unit case interrogates the opportunities and limitations of applying the OECD's education governance architecture in non-member economies.

### **AHELO in Egypt**

In light of the inspiring 25th of January revolution, the Egyptian people have expressed their desire for more effective reform, as well as greater expectations for better quality of service in all aspects of life, particularly education. The new era of democracy and transparency is in harmony with concepts such as self-assessment and the developments that a ground-breaking reform project like AHELO targets (Egypt NPM, quoted in OECD/AHELO, 2013a: 72).

Is there a meaningful correlation between quality assurance in higher education and political and social emancipation? More precisely, can an instrument like AHELO embed novel democratizing practices in evidence-based approaches to education policy and practice? While such important research questions elude the limited scope of this dissertation, Egypt's experience with AHELO suggests that universities play critical roles in social policy transformation in some national contexts.

Egypt joined the AHELO feasibility study for instrumental and pragmatic reasons not entirely of its own accord. The OECD, facing an acute budget shortfall threatening to derail the AHELO study, solicited countries outside its membership for participation as a way to (ostensibly) increase diversity but also to bridge the funding gap (OECD/AHELO, 2013a: 84). After securing €400,000 funding from the World Bank, Egypt joined the feasibility study in 2010. The loan was part of Egypt's ongoing commitments to working with the World Bank in education reform and could be regarded as a condition imposed by the Bank (interview, OECD/GR: March 14, 2013).

Egypt's experience with AHELO was noticeably different than the two other cases considered in this chapter. In some ways its "performance" in AHELO appealed to external stakeholders and, unlike Ontario and Mexico, Egypt did not benefit from the institutional voice supported by IMHE membership. Rather, beyond budgetary considerations, Egypt's participation seemed emblematic of the OECD's global relations strategy that seeks "worldwide policy coherence."<sup>106</sup> At the same time the OECD evinced little concern for how external funding ultimately impacted Egypt's performance or expectations:

They [World Bank] were not formally involved – well, hang on, did they fund some of the countries? Yes...when a country says we wish to be part of this, it is not any of our business where the money comes from. If a country - I think Egypt is a case - uses World Bank funding to pay the OECD and that is acceptable to the

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<sup>106</sup> The OECD's global relations strategy can be accessed here: <https://www.oecd.org/global-relations/globalrelationsstrategy/>

donor, then it's fine by us. So there was no direct funding from the World Bank, they would've supported the project by funding two or three countries - Colombia and Egypt would be two. In the case of Italy it was the foundation...and in fact the Lumina foundation assisted with the US costs. But that's fair enough (interview, OECD/EDU: March 13, 2013).

Egypt's participation in AHELO reflects how global education projects are often co-produced by IOs. Egypt is not a member of the OECD. However, in 2010, the OECD and World Bank co-produced the *Reviews of National Policies for Education: Higher Education in Egypt*, the product of systemic evaluation and policy recommendation in a number of higher education sectors "which, taken together, represent a major programme of structural and cultural reform of Egyptian higher education over the decade to 2020" (OECD/World Bank, 2010). Since 2000, the Egyptian government has made significant attempts to reform its higher education system to be more efficient and competitive.

Like Mexico, it introduced policy directives within the higher education system to address the twin problems of "massification" and quality assurance. These problems are perceived to result from rapidly expanding enrolment rates, a weak research and development culture within universities, and the demands for certain competencies and aptitudes resulting from Egypt's increasing global economic integration (Radwan et al., 2015).

Taking its cue from OECD and World Bank reports, the Egyptian government sought to meet massification and quality assurance demands through expanding private higher education and alternative modes of learning: "It is stated by the OECD/WB review



that this is a manageable expansion, provided that the bulk of growth is accommodated in private and non-university institutions, as well as in shorter programmes and mixed mode learning. However, achieving the necessary change in patterns of student enrolment will require fundamental structural and cultural changes” (OECD, 2010; Radwan et al., p. 41).

Egypt’s inclusion also permits us to see how AHELO’s rationality as a governing resource is linked to a regime of similar comparative indicators operating in co-production at the supranational level. For instance, the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals envision “development for all” through 17 broad policy goals, at least six of which relate directly or indirectly to education.<sup>107</sup>

These goals “were formulated with strong participation from the World Bank Group [and] are fully consistent with the World Bank Group’s own twin goals to end poverty and build shared prosperity in a sustainable manner” (World Bank/IBRD, 2019). The Sustainable Development Goals also orient the OECD’s new PISA for Development (PISA-D) study, launched in 2013, which aims to provide “insights on how to help students learn better, teachers to teach better and school systems to operate more effectively” (OECD/PISA-D, 2018).

PISA-D studies how large-scale assessment instruments can be developed in “a larger and more diverse set of countries, including a growing number of middle- and low-

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<sup>107</sup> These goals include: quality education; good health and well-being; gender equality; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; and reduced inequality.

income countries.”<sup>108</sup> A key methodological innovation in PISA-D is accounting for out-of-school children while “[producing] scores that are on the same scales as the main PISA assessment” (*ibid.*), thereby rendering socio-economic data from developing countries comparable to data produced in advanced economies. The effect of scaling existing methods and instruments to novel educational indicators in this way adds to the “deep structuration” of global education governance (Erkillä and Piironen). Egypt’s participation in AHELO thus points to the way comparative data informs a range of education policy work at the supranational level, reinforcing the legitimacy and purpose of these indicators as they scale across IO programmes and across an increasing number of countries.

Egypt’s participation unfolded against the backdrop of acute civil unrest as the Arab Spring bloomed across Egypt and much of the Arab world in 2011; the Egyptian NPM - a Ministry of Higher Education official in the newly appointed Muslim Brotherhood administration of Mohammad Morsi - wasted little effort in framing AHELO participation in politically expedient terms.

In fact, the Egyptian NPM drew a causal arrow between students’ thirst for reform under the new administration and the revolution itself, claiming that anger at reforms initiated in early 2000s (described further below) - including proposals to introduce tuition fees, which had been state subsidized by constitutional decree - “permitted an open

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<sup>108</sup> Countries that signed PISA-D participation agreements with the OECD include Bhutan (2017), Cambodia (2016), Ecuador (2014), Guatemala (2015), Honduras (2016), Panama (2016), Paraguay (2015), Senegal (2015) and Zambia (2014). See <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-for-development/pisa-for-development-background.htm>.

critique of the higher education system” that prompted students to become politically aware and politically active (interview, Egypt NPM: March 2013). The Egyptian NPM team described harrowing accounts of escorting students through tumultuous demonstrations to arrive at test-writing facilities.

Reflecting a human capital logic, the OECD lauded the “achievement” of the Egyptian team in testing students in the midst of social chaos, a testament to the desire to “[improve] Egypt’s competitiveness in the global knowledge-based economy” (OECD, 2013a: 73). Egypt, hailed as a “leading MENA country,” proudly demonstrated that education reform was possible even in the most politically turbulent of times. This example of national resolve for neoliberal reform could indeed be instructive for other non-member countries observing AHELO’s implementation in Egypt.

Egypt’s interest in establishing a comparative assessment regime for higher education is situated within structural and cultural reforms initiated in 2000 through the *Strategic Plan for Higher Education*, which aimed to “[reform] higher education through a comprehensive long-term reform plan (25 projects) to be implemented over three phases in the period 2002-2017” (Radwan et al., 2015: 2). This plan would promote technical and vocational programs and steer students away from “overcrowded theoretical and academic fields” in big publicly-subsidized universities toward, it was anticipated, STEM-related programmes and disciplines offered through private as well as public universities (interview, Egypt NPM: March 2013). This national strategy thus consisted of a two-pronged strategy for “higher education enhancement” (Radwan et al., 2015: 4).

First, a national qualifications framework established through the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Education (NAQAAE) in 2006 established an independent (e.g., non-governmental) authority for program accreditation across 157 higher education institutions (Radwan et al., 2015: 1). The NAQAAE “is an independent governmental entity under the Prime Minister’s governance and not affiliated to any ministry, which assures impartiality of its decisions; its board involves selected members from educational experts, businessmen and entrepreneurs” (*ibid.*, 5).<sup>109</sup>

In tandem, the Ministry of Higher Education instituted the Program of Continuous Improvement and Qualifying for Accreditation (PCIQA) in 2007 that sought to reform access to higher education. Tuition fees would no longer be subsidized for most academic programs, a highly contentious move that represented a clear break from traditional approaches. In addition, a regionalization initiative sought to alleviate pressure on the big universities (Cairo University, Zagazig, and Ain-Shams in particular) by requiring students to enrol at universities within their geographic area.

Added to this was a second “institutional strategy” that centred on improving “system steering and institutional governance” (OECD/World Bank, 2010). In practice, this required universities (and the Egyptian state) to relinquish some autonomy and to permit oversight by the private sector as universities pursued links with business and industry to offset budgetary shortfalls.

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<sup>109</sup> The list of board of directors is accessed here: [http://en.naqaae.eg/?page\\_id=2552](http://en.naqaae.eg/?page_id=2552)

This strategy implies technological transformation across Egypt's higher education system. Consistent with the digitizing theme of inclusive innovation (Planes-Satorra and Paunov, 2019), there has been a parallel effort to “fully automate” the teaching and learning experience in public institutions as a way of meeting the perceived needs of students. In Egypt, this automation unfolds in the creation of a national research library network linking all universities to a single database. There is also a plan to further develop automated student assessment technologies, including automated marking and reviews and an electronic database of students' questions and model answers (Radwan et al., p. 41).

How, if at all, are these priority areas in higher education - seemingly so integral to national growth and advancement, yet tied so visibly to privatization and segmentation - enabled through participation in AHELO? The feasibility study brought into focus the technological demands that face implementing some of these education policy changes. The AHELO National Centre in Egypt had to carefully coordinate with two national internet providers to ensure consistent broadband access and minimal disruption for test-takers (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 158), pointing to the way technological infrastructure in some contexts may in fact impede the deployment of ILSAs.

The Egyptian NPM succeeded in enrolling 19 universities including 4,212 students and 877 faculty from “various academic programmes (accredited and non-accredited)” across all three strands of the feasibility study - a monumental task facilitated

by what the OECD considered to be a very organized campaign lead by an especially competent NPM team (OECD/AHELO, 2013a).

*Table 7: Egypt university participation rates for students and faculty*

	AHELO strand		
	Generic skills	Engineering	Economics
Students sampled	1500	1500	1500
Students tested	1434	1648	1130
Response rate (%)	95.5	110	75
Faculty sampled	350	350	350
Faculty surveyed	319	327	231
Response rate (%)	91.1	93.4	66

(Source: OECD/AHELO, 2013a: 77)

In truth, the Egyptian delegation repeatedly misunderstood the scope and limitations of the AHELO study. Egypt is indeed an interesting within-unit case because we get a sense of how OECD governance in higher education intersects with policy environments in non-member countries. Egypt arrived to the feasibility study with preconceived ideas of how the data would be used. One member of the AHELO Consortium described the confusion and miscommunication that befell the Egyptian national experience:

I think there were failings from the OECD and from the consortium in articulating exactly what was going on. Part of that was that this project happened so fast for what was achieved...a lot of things were developing as it was

happening. There was an overall picture that everyone knew what we were trying to achieve, but the pathways for getting there was a bit different. I don't think anyone was perfect in this project by any means, it was a very difficult project, but with the Egyptians I think a fair bit of blame can be put on them. They were the only ones I know of anyway who kind of seemed to have not "got it." That's what I would say even though it sounds unfair. But we're not finding the same issues with other countries. Other countries have issues and people might feel like they don't have the right data, or don't know what to do and that sort of stuff, but the Egyptian stuff is more fundamental and they feel almost like they're being ripped off, they're being hoodwinked. I just think it's not fair. And it'll be interesting to see if the OECD thinks that or not. I know that they've been the most vocal in a lot of things (interview, AHELO Consortium: March 2013).

The Egyptian experience was marked by the noticeable absence of IMHE governance. Owing to lack of official membership in the IMHE, Egypt did not have the same governance structure or lines of reporting as the other AHELO participants. This lack of institutional representation may have impacted Egypt's ability to comprehend the terms of the study. Egypt's inclusion as a non-OECD country exposes some important limitations and vulnerabilities as the OECD carries out transnational projects premised, to a certain degree, on a set of shared norms and values. The OECD's "cognitive governance" function (Woodward, 2009) certainly rings hollow in global higher education. Rather, strategic interests in expanding (higher) education programming, coupled with an instrumental desire to give the world a technical proof of concept for an innovative study, underpins the OECD's mode of epistemological governance.

At the conclusion of AHELO in 2013 it appeared doubtful whether the IMHE could withstand the epochal shifts in global education governance emanating from the non-OECD world:

And we're in the process of repositioning it [IMHE] and it won't be up for a little while, but I suspect the [IMHE] program will not only be rebadged but re-conceptualized around the theme of 'higher education futures.' And we're going to run a conference in China next year in September or October, which will be an OECD conference. I'm expecting there will be a little chirping at the [board] meeting tomorrow about it, but...I said the OECD's gotta be relevant. And it might be the 31 industrialized countries now, but who's shaping higher education in the world? It's not all Europe. [hosting the conference in Beijing or Shanghai] is an absolutely willful, deliberate choice, but it's got to be...And what's in the interest of the Organization is for it to be in China, or Hong Kong, less so Japan or Singapore (personal interview, OECD/IMHE: March 13, 2013).

The “willful, deliberate choice” to reorient OECD higher education toward east Asian economies seemed evident given the explosive rise in demand for tertiary education and the internationalization/academic mobility of Asian students across the OECD world. Repositioning the IMHE in this way also spoke to the “PISA for higher education” imaginary: East Asian education systems - in particular top-ranked Singapore, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and, leading PISA in 2018, China - offered a compelling and relevant context for developing the OECD's global relations strategy around higher education programming. Yet the perceived “chirping at the board” underscored how



fractious this move could be interpreted by the IMHE members: In whose interests would OECD education serve?

Egypt's experience once again points to the normative dissonance in IMHE and in OECD global education more broadly. Asked whether he believed the IMHE would recover from the fractious politics undermining its purpose, the IMHE respondent replied tentatively: "I'm not optimistic yet - ask me next year. I think it's at a point where this organization might be around in three years. I tell you: the Australian institutions won't stay, and people will vote with their feet and say well what's the most important international organization for us? And while we're branded as higher education management, it's too narrow" (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 13, 2013).

### **Conclusion: the politics of education in Ontario, Mexico and Egypt**

While the OECD sets into motion complex education studies on a global scale, and indeed steers the governance of those studies through elaborate lines of communication sustained by expert/epistemic authorities, its ability to implement these studies is facilitated, enabled, and constrained by emerging political actors in the global education governance field.

The AHELO feasibility study brings into relief the contentious politics of higher education in Ontario. The assessment of university learning outcomes constitutes one of several elements in Ontario's decades-long shift toward evidence-based education management. In the early 2000s, the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents

(OCAV) instituted degree level expectations across Ontario universities that have formed the partial basis for an outcomes-based approach to education assessment.

The merits of this policy approach to education quality are echoed in arguments promoting the efficiency, performance, and cost-effectiveness of alternative budget models that, according to opponents of this coordinated policy approach, reduce education to the barest instrumental purpose. Sustained efforts by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQSA) and the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA) to institute and consolidate evidence-based higher education management have been met with pushback from the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) and, more recently, by Universities Canada.

Faculty support for AHELO (and AHELO-like tools) among engineering departments in Ontario universities reflects a history of accreditation in the engineering field. This support for yet another assessment tool is far from representative; the IMHE, despite its confused lines of governance and incompetent directorship (interview OECD/IMHE: March 2013), reveals how AHELO's conceptualization and methodology was far from unanimously endorsed. Universities Canada, which represented Canadian universities in the IMHE, strenuously objected to a revised AHELO study. The Ontario case illustrates how HEQCO, Ontario university faculty (and faculty associations), and university associations each had different perspectives and expectations about what an AHELO tool could accomplish.

A fields approach recognizes how the OECD, technical experts and political/governmental authorities must negotiate with university and academic authorities to convene a study like AHELO. The relative authority of each is brought into relief through empirical investigation into AHELO implementation across my case studies.

Rates of student participation in Ontario give further pause to the “feasibility” of global education governance projects like AHELO. Though technically feasible the AHELO study required the convening of authority among university actors. Total student participation in Ontario (60%) may point to a level of apathy toward a culture of assessment visible in other contexts (e.g., Netherlands, Finland, and Norway).

Ontario’s experience with AHELO reveals an equally fascinating discovery in this dissertation. The inter-jurisdictional report on student data shared between Ontario and Australia (Lennon and Jonker, 2014) evidences how the OECD promotes the diffusion of transnational knowledge networks. The OECD’s governance of AHELO in Ontario and Australia creates an opportunity for quality assurance agencies to claim a stake in the emerging global education policy field. The clustering of quality assurance agencies in “like-minded” systems and countries may in fact lead to education governance hierarchies that (re)produce structures of power and authority in the global education policy field. In describing such novel sites of analysis in political economies of higher education, this dissertation contributes to the International Assessment Studies (IAS) literature and the GPE literature more broadly.

My empirical case study of Mexican universities adds a further contribution to the extant literatures on global education governance by locating important sites of sub-national policy diffusion. The inclusion of these “mature institutions” reveals a political authority that facilitates or constrains evidence-based higher education management. Mexico’s participation in AHELO again demonstrates how the OECD - as an important epistemic authority in global education - can help coordinate these efforts through governance arrangements that bring together national universities with emerging discourses in global education.

My interviews reveal how the Mexican state was eager and willing to permit its universities, by virtue of new accountability measures in a novel “culture of evaluation,” take the lead in this international study and provide a “proof of concept” for Mexico’s other HEIs. This proof of concept in Mexico relied on the OECD’s claim to pragmatic and moral legitimacy in ways that Ontario did not.

While Ontario’s assessment culture was relatively entrenched through institutional and disciplinary approaches that only came to be officially endorsed through a binding accreditation framework in 2015, Mexico had comparatively little institutional memory in this regard. In fact, the Mexico NPM team fundamentally struggled to obtain the data from the OECD that would validate its efforts to understand the (anticipated) institutional impact of a study like AHELO.

Mexico’s (and Egypt’s) struggles to understand AHELO’s scope and terms of reference further problematizes a “global” governance study that relies, to some extent,

on shared normative and cognitive frameworks underpinned by a legitimate order. Indeed, the OECD's epistemic authority fractured over questions of "right" and "wrong":

What countries are still asking for - they want the codebooks. I'm assuming that the right and wrong in this, and I will not be on one side, they never are in these complex issues, I think the codebooks are in the hands of the OECD, and I think since March of last year they've been updated and so on. I think countries also want the answer keys, and I think the OECD has most of those - but there is some friction obviously here between the OECD and ACER (16:45), but I think those issues have mostly been negotiated in the recent past (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013).

Some of the contractors reflected on the OECD's "shit model" of governance and suggested institutions should bypass the OECD completely and engage directly with experts:

In terms of the whole process, it probably wouldn't have happened without the OECD being there to coordinate or kickstart the project; but in terms of governance, it's a shit model because HEIs, while often funded by their governments, having a government organization talking to governments about funding, and then governments having to talk to institutions, and then contractors coordinating with all of them, I think it's a bit shitty and it would be better if it was institutions coordinating this. The OECD's not the right one because it's a governmental organization, but another organization that was interested in institutions that served institutions, if they were the conduit rather than having to go through governments, and not excluding governments but involving them if they want to be, but that would be a better way of doing it... It depends on what AHELO becomes, if it becomes anything. AHELO is an OECD project so it will

always be like that, it's always going to have that structure, but really if it's meant to be about improving learning and maybe collaboration between institutions then having to use government as a conduit for that collaboration may not be the way (interview, AHELO Consortium: March 2013).

This AHELO debrief in March 2013 by one of the contractors casts the OECD's governance of AHELO into disrepute and validates the frustrations experienced by Mexico and Egypt, among others jurisdictions.

And here the contrast between Ontario and Mexico further illustrates how some participants in the AHELO study benefitted from transnational networks developed through "like-minded" higher education systems while others did (do) not. In this regard the comments by the IMHE member on the privatization of comparative assessment tools was indeed prescient. In the final analysis what value added does the OECD provide its institutional members? Policy failure in global education seems fairly assured when university administrators and education experts at the very centre of these governance architectures decry the "shit model" of OECD education governance where directors are "asleep at the wheel."

Countries like Mexico may, in the final analysis, urge their institutions to turn away from intergovernmental organizations toward private sector providers who have very different accountabilities and proprietary motivations for gathering, analyzing and disseminating student and institutional data. This is perhaps one of the more startling features and ironic potentialities of the neoliberal sweep to higher education governance:

those very IOs that embrace a neoliberal model of human capital to justify evidence-based higher education management policies may end up urging countries and institutions to turn to the private sector for better informed and more supportive policy guidance in formulating governance at a distance.

If the politics of education in Egypt indeed reflect the democratizing potential of higher education activism, as the Egyptian NPM asserts, then university students will be the vanguard for broader social policy transformation - especially in democracies in transition. The research implications for this hypothesis are above and beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, it is instructive that a global governance study like AHELO could motivate and encourage students to assert their agency in the midst of revolutionary chaos; indeed, this portends important lessons for the OECD as it looks to expand its policy reach into countries beyond its membership - into those countries entering a fragile and uncertain new policy environment (e.g., Colombia's accession in 2021) where evidence-based management tools imply a broader reorganization of governance and a potentially new social contract underpinned by the global knowledge economy imaginary.

## **CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUDING AHELO**

Their experience points to perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from the feasibility study: that the assessment of higher education outcomes is not an end in itself, but rather a stimulus to deeper professional dialogue on desired learning outcomes and the teaching approaches needed to achieve them (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 192).

The previous two empirical chapters describe AHELO's technical development and the feasibility study's implementation in three national jurisdictions: Ontario (Canada), Mexico, and Egypt. My empirical research into the AHELO feasibility study reveals a global education governance field constituted by the OECD, by governmental actors, by technical experts and contractors, and by academic authorities. At the global level, comparative learning outcome assessments would augment higher education quality assurance across OECD (and non-member) countries; AHELO would permit governments and university administrators to "cut up the data" in order to make informed decisions about student learning. In designing AHELO, the OECD also sought to build on its "family of assessments" as a way to establish its epistemological legitimacy for AHELO (and its tertiary education file) while attempting to assert a position of pre-eminent authority in a global education policy environment dominated by traditional university rankings.

At the national level, AHELO clearly appealed to some participants, including Ontario (Canada). While results from the study did not provide Ontario (or any of the



participants) with meaningful student-level data, AHELO nonetheless prompted Ontario, Japan and Australia to share their experiences about comparative learning outcomes and to seek cooperation and broader engagement in quality assurance beyond the OECD study. In this way, AHELO “succeeded” in generating transnational cooperation in education policy beyond the limited goals of the feasibility study.

This cooperation problematizes how the policy and governance literatures conceive of policy failure. Presenting AHELO as a “stimulus” to deeper dialogue in education policy and practice refutes the organizational thesis that the OECD simply failed to convene sufficient bureaucratic authority to propel AHELO into a main study.

Rather, eminent experts in education metrics conferred upon the OECD a “proof of concept” by validating assessment frameworks and novel testing instruments in varied higher education contexts. Alone, this evidences a significant feat of innovation in epistemic authority, validating the OECD’s pragmatic legitimacy in implementing such a monumental task in global education governance.

And yet, alone, this technical achievement ultimately failed to persuade important education stakeholders of AHELO’s practical and political feasibility. In addition to a “messy” governance structure that complicated national implementation, a chorus of academic voices represented by Universities Canada and the American Council on Education objected to the OECD’s vision for an AHELO main study.

The empirical research presented in this dissertation thus points to an authority-legitimacy gap in global education as the source of AHELO’s failure to proceed to a main

study. This final chapter brings into analysis a) the conclusion of the AHELO feasibility study and its reimagining as a main study; b) key findings (and limitations) from my empirical research; and c) the legacy, or “AHELO effect,” of comparative assessment technologies on the global education policy field.

### **Concluding and reimagining AHELO**

As AHELO concluded in March 2013 underlying currents of policy failure rose to the surface, ultimately scuttling Columbus’ ship that had set sail in Athens in 2006 with such promise. This section draws from my empirical research to review three principle elements that contributed to AHELO’s policy failure: its mismanagement of data analysis and data collection; its failure to convene stakeholder legitimacy for a revised main study proposal; and its disintegration of IMHE as a locus of institutional support and authority.

In March 2013, the OECD convened a conference in Paris to debrief the AHELO participants. *Measuring Learning Outcomes in Higher Education: Lessons Learnt from the AHELO Feasibility Study and Next Steps* assembled OECD directors and analysts, national project coordinators, university personnel, technical experts and other stakeholder groups to discuss and debrief the AHELO study over three days.<sup>110</sup>

Volume 3 of the AHELO feasibility study report, entitled “Further Insights,” (OECD/AHELO, 2013b) coincided with the final conference and presented national

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<sup>110</sup> I attended this conference as a participant-observer. Proceedings from the conference can be accessed at <https://www.oecd.org/site/ahelo/ahelofsconferenceagenda.htm>

experiences in the context of a “future AHELO.” According to one senior technical expert with intimate knowledge of AHELO, the OECD “was bloodied by AHELO” (personal interview, GNE/TAG: March 2013). Andreas Schleicher, esteemed education policy entrepreneur and director of Education and Skills, spoke at this conference as if AHELO was being revealed anew: “Did you listen to the presentation by Andreas? He doesn’t talk about the feasibility study - he talks about doing an AHELO as if nothing has taken place” (personal interview, GNE/TAG: March 2013).

Framing AHELO as a “stimulus for deeper professional dialogue” was an attempt by the OECD to obfuscate the profound challenges, objections and failures to the implementation of its feasibility study. As phase two reached its conclusion, contractual disagreements between ACER and the Secretariat once again marred the efficient delivery of country-level data.

Echoing the complaints of NPMs, including Mexico, one IMHE member confirmed: “What the OECD hasn’t got back is some of the more detailed technical aspects, and these have been under some contention and some discussion...and outside the contract - what institutions and national data centres are saying and not happy about, notwithstanding what was said today, which I don’t know, they don’t have the codebooks and the answer keys” (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013).

The OECD was understandably keen to move past the feasibility study. AHELO’s technical feasibility was overshadowed by its evident failure in convening legitimacy for a governance structure that left many countries in the lurch at the time of data collection

and analysis. This failure was exacerbated by contractual disputes the OECD had anticipated but had ultimately failed to mitigate. Its governance of AHELO was the OECD's principal "failure." This failure cascaded to the subnational level

As country participants and observers left Paris, EDU eagerly sought to apply "further insights" to a main study proposal.

### ***Main study proposal***

A main AHELO study would seek to establish AHELO "as a key element of the OECD's work in collecting education data to inform policy, strategy and institutional improvement" over cyclical studies akin to PISA. A reworked AHELO, designed with lessons from the feasibility study in mind, "would constitute a long-term roadmap for future evolution, enabling member countries to steer AHELO on the basis of a clear understanding of utility, cost and value" (OCED/EDPC, 2013: 3).

In March 2015, the OECD published the final draft of the main study proposal outlining the purpose, value, scope, governance structure and funding framework of a revised AHELO. (Table 5.1 below outlines the changes made to a main study in light of the feasibility study). The *Revised Scoping Paper for an AHELO Main Study* acknowledged the gains as well as the challenges that surfaced from the feasibility study: "Focusing on what students know and can do, the study demonstrated that a large scale comparative assessment of higher education learning outcomes is conceptually valid and for the most part technically feasible. However, a number of questions were left unanswered" (OECD/EDPC, 2013: 3).

In April 2015, Schleicher undertook to answer some of these questions in a detailed presentation to AHELO stakeholders. Opening his presentation by reasserting that “it’s hard to improve what isn’t measured,” Schleicher sketched a reimagined and more ambitious AHELO.

His vision for AHELO would expand the scope of disciplines to be tested and introduce more sophisticated data handling tools and technology to provide “combined formative and summative assessment interpretations.”<sup>111</sup> Thus reimagined, AHELO would, in theory and in practice, standardize the delivery of classroom instruction and develop the tools and metrics to measure the “quality” of that delivery. Thereby, AHELO would seek to consolidate evidence-based higher education management tools and, in principle, revolutionize tertiary learning by quantifying that institutional gain that was so elusive at the outset of the feasibility study.

For Schleicher, the major challenges from the feasibility study including the problem of “defining and operationalising higher education learning outcomes in ways that are valid across programmes, institutions, sub-systems and cultures.” Overcoming these methodological problems would require additional surveys and contextual data from institutional, departmental and faculty levels - effectively expanding the “multi-dimensional quality space” with more ever more data to establish meaningful university comparisons.

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<sup>111</sup> <https://prezi.com/bnpgqwaq7mbz/ahelo-strategy/>

Table 8: AHELO's reimagining as a Main Study, April 2015

<i>Scope</i>	<i>AHELO FS (2008-2015)</i>	<i>AHELO MS (proposed)</i>
<i>Governance</i>	AHELO steered by IMHE in conjunction with EDPC; top down with little strategic input from academic stakeholders	AHELO to be steered by member countries (EDPC) but governed by national or subnational government authorities; IMHE abolished in December 2016
	Academic stakeholders not sufficiently consulted	Seek stakeholder consultation earlier in project design; strong role for new Academic Advisory Group
	Secretariat “fell asleep at the wheel”; confused governance structure	Provide productive feedback and facilitative dialogue to “fuel accountability and improvement decisions at multiple levels”
	“Mandated” assessments are neither effective nor desirable	Peer review mechanisms for embedding teaching and learning best practices
	International consensus limited to technical expertise from Italy, Japan and the USA	Achieve “proven” international consensus on development of instrumentation
<i>Instruments/ assessment frameworks</i>	Economics and Engineering were chosen for being “above-content” and stable across cultures	Proceeding cautiously toward new domains to improve applicability with an emphasis on “higher-order transversal skills”
	Assessment frameworks mix of CAE, ETS and ACER instrumentation	Re-use some of existing assessment instrumentation
	Common set of generic skills tested for all strands	Domain-specific generic skills to be assessed within disciplinary strands

	Institutional missions and student intakes are highly varied, frustrating valid comparisons	Focus on measures at institutional, faculty and department level
	Tested only a sample of students from university population	Test all eligible students from chosen university disciplines
<i>Funding/implementation</i>	Project delays reduced implementation preparation phase of the feasibility study (2009-2012)	Field trial, analysis and reporting
	Financing was dependent on enrolling new participants, exacerbated by financial crisis	Project budgeted at €15,945,575 over five years

(Source: accessed online at <https://prezi.com/bnpgqwaq7mbz/ahelo-strategy/>)

This space and the data it would generate would thus provide a more methodologically-robust platform for comparing like institutions. The proliferation of periodic international large scale assessments (ILSAs) would effectively establish a benchmark in global higher education and provide a scientifically-viable counterbalance to global rankings.

A main study thus concentrated on methodological tweaks to the model rather than addressing the substantive concerns, such as a more fundamental shift in higher education content, delivery, and assessment implied by the OECD's vision. This approach to adjusting policy settings without a fundamental revamp of the guiding orthodoxy is characteristic of ideological paradigms guiding (neoliberal) policies (Hall, 1993).

*Critical response to the revised scoping paper*

The OECD's revised scoping paper for AHELO in April 2015 was met with redoubled criticism from the educational sector. On May 7, 2015, Universities Canada (UC) and the American Council for Education (ACE)<sup>112</sup> penned a letter to Secretary-General Angel Gurría voicing strenuous opposition to a future AHELO main study.<sup>113</sup>

This opposition represented the second principle factor underlying AHELO's policy "failure."

UC/CAE outlined several objectives to a main study. Foremost, the OECD was developing a future programme "without clarity of purpose or consultation with institutions," leading to the perception of "lack of transparency and integrity attached to the current process" (UC/ACE, 2015). Despite promises of a new Academic Advisory Group that would steer the main study through a bottom-up governance, the OECD's "troubling disregard of criticism regarding problems and limitations raised by wide cross-section of stakeholders" (UC/ACE, 2015) took critical aim at a bureaucratic culture evidencing a path dependency that foreclosed a more inclusive governance model.

Indeed, the ancient Latin dictum of *festina lente* ("make haste slowly") divided those who perceived the OECD rushing through feasibility from those exasperated by a

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<sup>112</sup> Universities Canada, formerly the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, is "a membership organization providing university presidents with a unified voice for higher education, research and innovation." UC advocates at the federal level and fosters collaboration between universities, governments and the private sector in Canada and internationally (<https://www.univcan.ca/about-us/>)

<sup>113</sup> This letter can be accessed online at [https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server\\_files/files/ACE-UC%20AHELO%20Letter.pdf](https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/server_files/files/ACE-UC%20AHELO%20Letter.pdf)



prolonged and halting proof of concept: “Having said all that, I’m sure there’ll be faults on both sides because you know someone said yesterday that the process has been too rushed; it’s only gone for seven years, and I thought to myself, well fuck me dead. You know, seven years. Fuck me dead. Seven years? How long can we actually wait? If you can’t show some delivery in six-seven years, forget it” (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013).

As substantively, the letter interrogated the “one size fits all” approach to standardizing learning outcomes and the unwillingness of the OECD to “openly hear the views of institutional leaders, whose perspectives are most closely informed about the diversity of academic courses and missions.” This critique was levelled primarily at the OECD’s treatment of institutional voices with IMHE.

The Chair of the IMHE thus elaborates on the “core challenge” of mediating between officials, researchers and scholars:

It’s a core challenge. The [IMHE] organization, in its current form, is terminal. And because it comprises three different sorts of groups: it comprises higher education researchers; it comprises governments and officials, you know government ministers and officials; and it comprises rectors, vice-chancellors and presidents, all their nominees. There are three sorts of species that you see present not only at IMHE, on the IMHE board, but at IMHE gatherings. But at least one of those groups doesn’t like the other two. For the most part the researchers don’t like the officials, or what they stand for, or what the universities or systems are doing. The very good example was at the biennial conference of September last year [2012], where Australia now has a national higher education regulator, and

it's the first of its species in the world. It's called TEQSA, and the chief commission (Carol Nicol) got up and the officials in the room loved what she said, and the scholars in the room hated it (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013).

When asked about obtaining consensus for steering AHELO with so many diverse and potentially conflicting interests, one IMHE member replied: "Push really hard. And let everyone to speak, and try to be honest in the summation of what is going in the room, but identify a pathway and say does anyone think there is an alternative to it? And basically, it's directed consensus in a gentle way. You tend to work it out before you get there as you do in other things" (interview, OECD/IMHE: March 2013).

Directed consensus and "preparatory activities" are characteristic of peer review processes at the heart of the OECD's normative governance (Carroll and Kellow, 2011) and would also extend to the IMHE as a matter of principle. However, such bureaucratic culture evidently conflicts with the varied institutional cultures represented in the IMHE. Harmsen and Braband (2019: 11) persuade us that in "designing AHELO, the OECD secretariat followed its conventional approach, seeking to construct a policy problem that privileged its own pivotal role as the central authority defining both the parameters of debate and the relevant evidential bases."

### ***Dissolution of the IMHE***

In November 2015, the IMHE Governing Board voted to discontinue the work of the Higher Education Programme at the end of its mandate in December 2016.<sup>114</sup> This step represented the final and decisive moment of AHELO's policy failure. The IMHE was constituted as a "*permanent* forum in which education professionals worldwide [could] exchange experiences and benefit from shared reflection, thought and analysis" (emphasis added).<sup>115</sup> Drawing on the IMHE's "strategic position" within the OECD, the activities of this specialized forum "[had] a global reach and include[d] monitoring and analysing policy making; gathering data; and exchanging new ideas, as well as reflecting on past experience. These activities assist[ed] members to contribute to the development of higher education internationally, nationally and locally" (OECD, 2014).

Originating as a decentralized programme "in order to relieve the budgetary pressure on the core programmes" (Papadopoulos, 1994: 15), the IMHE was significant because its operational work represented education professionals among universities from around the world, lending a rich cross-section of institutional perspectives in the shaping of a "global" education policy field.

As a subscription-based institute operating outside of the core (Part I) OECD budget, the IMHE enjoyed a degree of flexibility that allowed it to explore those "palliative" issues in education that perhaps could not be justified through core funding by member states. The dissolution of the IMHE marks a significant shift in the

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<sup>114</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/imhe/>

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/imhe/About-IMHE-2014-Web-EN.pdf>

governance of OECD education. And while the OECD regularly reviews its education work to ensure programming targets are realistic, relevant and valuable to member states, the “need for programme renewal is a permanent challenge to the Secretariat, compounded by client expectations that the work should lead to forward-looking analyses and conclusions rather than the reproduction of conventional wisdom” (Papadopoulos, 1994: 15).

The OECD’s tertiary education work, including additional cross-national studies in learning outcomes, may yet continue under the rebranded Higher Education Programme, which was introduced following the dissolution of IMHE. However, this programme reports exclusively to the Education Policy Committee and does not include institutional representatives to shape and steer the scope of its work. Rather, the OECD’s new tertiary education agenda is explicitly focused on understanding trends in the knowledge economy, e.g., artificial intelligence (AI) and digitization, and is oriented toward research and policy recommendations for employer stakeholders in the knowledge economy.

In the competition for recognition of authority in global higher education, the dissolution of a key institutional voice for universities at the OECD reveals a critical authority-legitimacy gap: how can the OECD legitimately claim to advance “better policies for better lives” in the area of education without consulting the diverse higher education institutions on behalf of whom such projects are ostensibly launched? Moreover, if OECD governments seek to build and implement quality assurance reform

in higher education *without* strategic buy-in from HEIs, then the legitimacy for these “global” education projects will continue to encounter resistance from academic stakeholders, fuelling the inexorability narrative around education neoliberalism.

### **Principle findings**

The empirical data in this dissertation provides insight into an historically important and unique study in global education governance. My study of AHELO helps to answer some of the following questions:

1. Who claims authority over comparative indicators in global education governance?
2. What discursive, technical and political resources are deployed in convening novel forms and patterns of authority across these scales?
3. Where is authority in global education enabled and resisted?
4. Why is “competition for authority” important for the study of global governance?

The principle findings and observations identified in my dissertation offer important contributions to the global governance, international relations and education sociology literatures.

### ***Competition for recognition of authority***

Who claims authority over comparative indicators in global education governance? Competition for authority over the governance of novel evidence-based higher education management tools unfolds across the education governance landscape and in variable ways. My study disaggregates “global” education governance to reveal the competition for legitimacy and authority at the global, transnational, and subnational scales.

*1. The global (supranational) level*

Through AHELO the OECD claimed authority over comparative indicators by asserting the legitimacy of evidence-based higher education management policies. The OECD discursively constructed its AHELO as a tool that would “counterbalance” a global university rankings regime depicted as prejudicial toward large, prestigious and well endowed “world class” universities (OECD/AHELO, 2012: 29; Wilkins and Huisman, 2012). The literature has shown how rankings can be manipulated, gamed, and distorted by university administrations keen on augmenting their relative position in this influential regime (Hazelkorn, 2018; Kehm, 2020; Biagioli and Lippman, 2020).

The OECD signalled its competition for recognition in the global rankings regime in three principal ways.

First, the process of convening expert authority for incorporating the Tuning-AHELO methodology - described in Chapter Four of my study - buttressed the OECD’s claim to epistemic authority in global education. Tuning was developed through university research centres in Europe (Italy and Netherlands) with input from Japanese

(NIER) and US (NSSE and CHEPS) centres. The legitimacy of international *academic* expertise was reinforced by expert authority when ACER and CAE validated the frameworks for international implementation.

The OECD thus competes for authority in the global rankings regime on the basis of its alternative methodology rooted in an existing academic culture of assessment supported by previous projects. Methodologies like Tuning anchor “imaginaries of reputation” (Collins and Park, 2016) partly through the effect of “black-boxing” (Latour, 1987) foundational controversies. Following its application in a complex regional setting like Bologna and the European Higher Education Area and throughout the world in other projects, the Tuning methodology is deemed legitimate for the task of assessing OECD higher education learning outcomes at the global level. In this way, the OECD can claim scientific robustness in competing with global rankings by drawing on the legitimacy of academic methodology.

Second, the discursive dissemination of AHELO as a “PISA for higher education” certainly called upon the legitimacy of PISA as an established and globally configured comparative study implemented in various OECD and non-OECD education systems. Despite the fact that PISA and AHELO measured different student populations and targeted data at different system levels, both belonged to a “family of assessments” (OECD/AHELO, 2013b) anchored to an ILSA regime spanning decades of comparative research.

The analogy of AHELO as a PISA for higher education thus entailed an important claim about AHELO's logic of appropriateness in measuring academic performance through widely accepted benchmarking methodologies. Despite PISA's critical reception in academic literature (e.g. Grek, 2009; Martens and Jakobi, 2010; Gorur, 2016) and in media (e.g., the "scandal" of China's PISA results) it has continued to enjoy broad implementation and is firmly established as an OECD main programme.

The literature describes a policy as numbers as a form of authority; but what is more accurate is to describe *evidence-based tools* as a form of authority within a field of global ranking dominated by numbers, indicators, indices and benchmarking. AHELO therefore asserts recognition as an alternative, more "legitimate" tool within this field.

Third, AHELO can be aptly described as a second-generation, or "actionable," indicator (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018) with powerful effects on governance fields. Learning outcome data can be cut in many ways in a multi-dimensional quality space. Its appeal and use by different audiences (students, administrators, government, media, quality assurance agencies, accreditation bodies, employers, other education assessment organizations) evidences multiple ways indicators may operate in a dynamic governance field.

Actionable indicators are detailed, descriptive and exhibit causality; they are *actionable* in the sense of being able to provide ongoing monitoring of specific governance mechanisms, and causal in their effects on adjacent fields (Erkkilä and Piironen use the examples of innovation and competitiveness).



Where a “traditional” university ranking may simply name (and shame by omission), actionable indicators “function more subtly through expert knowledge and peer review” (Erkkilä and Piironen, 2018: 126-7). There is an epistemic legitimacy to the scientific method of actionable indicators like those produced through AHELO.

Moreover, actionable indicators are portable; they perform a policy mapping function “as they allow different representations of data” to expand the field(s) in which these indicators can be applied (Erkkilä and Piironen: 126). Comparative indicators in AHELO are not merely passive technologies used by other actors within the network structure, but *actants* that possess agency in their actionable properties (Fenwick and Edwards, 2012).

An example using the AHELO engineering test is illustrative. Comparative indicators for engineering learning outcomes across the different higher education systems would expand the education, social and economic policy fields in which these indicators could be used; policy networks are subsequently developed through the mobilization of testing instruments in different national settings and their standardization at the transnational level. Second-generation indicators thus contribute to the *diffusion* of a key technological aspect of the global education policy field.

## *2. The transnational level*

My empirical research into AHELO reveals a competition for authority over learning outcomes at the transnational level. My study identified the way AHELO brings

accreditation and quality assurance regimes together in powerful transnational networks shaping global knowledge economies.

Accreditation bodies, including those adhering to the 1989 Washington Accord orienting Ontario's engineering graduate learning outcomes, seek standardized learning outcomes as a way to benchmark professional conduct in knowledge industries. Assessing disciplinary and program outcomes is essential in developing centres of knowledge capital, which are increasingly global in scope.

Engineering was selected as a disciplinary strand in the AHELO study precisely for the way its disciplinary content and principles of professional practice cut across language, cultures and national boundaries. Indeed, engineering programs require engineers who can think critically but also communicate cross-culturally to solve common problems. The University of Guelph thus describes engineering learning outcomes that produce autonomy and professional capacity in students in order to inculcate "an independence of thought" contributing to global understanding and solidarity (Kenny and Desmarais, 2012: 8-11).<sup>116</sup>

Quality assurance agencies emerge within the global education policy field to assess the return on investment of higher education, to advise government on reform agendas, and to steer these policies into place within higher education settings.

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<sup>116</sup> Accessed at [https://www.uoguelph.ca/vpacademic/avpa/outcomes/KennyDesmarais\\_LearningOutcomesGuide\\_2012.pdf](https://www.uoguelph.ca/vpacademic/avpa/outcomes/KennyDesmarais_LearningOutcomesGuide_2012.pdf)

Following the final AHELO debrief in March 2013, Canada (represented by HEQCO), Australia (ACER) and Japan (NIER) entered into a MOU to share data as a basis for future collaboration. Summarizing efforts for joint analysis of AHELO data between these three countries, HEQCO noted:

the reliability and validity of the [AHELO] data is questionable and should not be considered an accurate portrait of student achievement. However, Australian information is provided in order to gain a deeper insight into the activities in Ontario. The sharing of data also makes it possible to create a larger sample size and analyze characteristics that may impact student success regardless of jurisdictional boundaries (Lennon and Jonker, 2014: 15).

HEQCO considered the OECD data “questionable” and inaccurate, unreflective of student achievement in the Ontario context. The Ontario, Australian and Japanese NPMs implied their method of inter-jurisdictional coordination would result in a “a larger sample size” resulting in more authoritative results.

This coordination between HEQCO (Canada), ACER (Australia) and NIER (Japan) brings to light the ways in which the OECD’s normative governance structures assist in the actuation of alternative or parallel transnational networks. As evidenced by the report emanating from HEQCO’s experience (Lennon and Jonker, 2014), some countries were able to build on AHELO’s conceptualization of measuring cross-institutional learning outcomes and begin gathering data for their own comparative purposes.

My research into AHELO lends insight into how the OECD's normative governance permits and even encourages these transnational knowledge networks to flourish among members. Yet these networks seemed unevenly distributed. Indeed, Ontario and Australia exemplified how "like with like institutions" could forge novel networks; other countries, including Mexico and Egypt, were ridiculed for failing to grasp the limited scope of AHELO (interview, OECD/AHELO Consortium: March 2013).

Finally, AHELO revealed an important role for private and technical authorities in global education governance. The international contractors had considerable epistemic authority over AHELO's project management. ACER, who led the AHELO Consortium, validated the Tuning assessment frameworks and instruments deployed at the institutional level; managed country-level implementation through a communications strategy with NPMs; and oversaw data analysis.

At the same time, ACER's legitimacy as an epistemic authority gradually faded as the project went into phase 2 implementation. Overt displays of hostility and moments of tense conflict between ACER's International Project Director and CAE's Director of Generic Skills strand hinted at some of the personal and corporate ambitions underlying their involvement in the OECD study.

Interview data from the IMHE also revealed the growing significance of private companies (e.g., the Aggarwal brothers) in global accreditation business. These firms were depicted by the IMHE Chair as slick, motivated, media- and tech-savvy, and more efficient than the OECD in supplying employers with relevant learning outcome data.

These private actors and technical experts in global education evidence the growth of transnational knowledge networks within which authority over learning outcomes is contested.

The ability of technical experts to construct, administer, and measure learning outcome instruments invariably means that technical authority affects the diffusion of education policy on a global scale through, in part, defining what is measurable and creating assessment frameworks designed to work in many different national contexts. This suggests that experts are contributing to a political structure that Lingard and others identify as the global education policy field. Structures of expert governance thus act as mechanisms of policy diffusion, elaborating upon an established literature in global public policy.

This dissertation shows that technical authority is instrumental to the social construction of knowledge. Disciplines are, by very definition, structured by shared norms, practices and beliefs. Disciplines have followed technical standards for a long time, so there is nothing really novel about standardized disciplines in fields that include global financial and accounting standards, for example. But these technical standards are loaded with normative-moral, institutional, and political struggle. Technical standards sometimes contain contradictory elements, for instance where scientific feasibility offers unsure political gains. This is the example of AHELO.

The social construction of knowledge, finally, presents a clear problem of theoretical and methodological incommensurability. How are assessment instruments

constructed that take into account the sensitive contextual nature of learning in varied national, cultural, and linguistic settings? The AHELO feasibility study was meant to overcome these context-sensitive variables by striving for a “common language” around statistics and numbers. The idea that a global benchmark in education assessment can *speak on behalf* of such human diversity is premised on the depoliticization of contextual variables and the erasure of nuanced and deeply social factors that contribute to learning.

### *3. The subnational level*

My empirical research into AHELO further reveals a competition for recognition of authority and legitimacy at the subnational level.

Indeed, the inter-jurisdictional cooperation between Ontario, Australia and Japan belied a degree of contestation within respective jurisdictions. HEQCO, the NPM team managing Canada’s AHELO implementation, and the AUCC, which represented Canada on the IMHE, had starkly competing visions for assessing quality in higher education. Where AHELO was managed and supported by HEQCO it was strenuously opposed by the AUCC (later rebranded as Universities Canada) as evidenced by its letter of objection to the OECD.

This tension and conflict between quality assurance regimes and institutional representatives in global education governance points to the challenges of convening internal authority for these projects. Where quality assurance regimes and ministries of education principally view higher education reform through a *quantitative* lens, seeking returns on investment, university and faculty associations - including UC and OCUFA -

view education change through *qualitative* lens. The differences in perspective are fundamental to efforts to reform the higher education policy environment.

It is the struggle for legitimacy of these comparative indicators within university environments that is so interesting and relevant for this study. AHELO requires engagement by students and faculty in order to produce meaningful, reliable and robust results. As Mexico shows, universities play a critical role in mobilizing other institutions to participate, evidencing a form of legitimacy not well understood in analyses of global education governance. The case in Ontario reveals that the legitimacy and authority of (engineering) accreditation regimes does not lead to more meaningful student engagement with global assessment technologies. Finally, the examples given in my study of the nordic institutions reveal a flat apathy for assessment regimes.

### ***Universities as objects/subjects of governance***

Universities are objects of governance in the global education literature; seldom are they portrayed as agents in the education policy field. This dissertation provides empirical evidence of their important function in the architecture of global education governance.

Universities have long been using learning outcome assessments to gauge institutional and program quality, academic excellence and student performance. Comparative assessments like AHELO are designed to compete with global rankings by offering a more technically- and methodologically-robust assessment instrument. Indeed, rather than rely on opaque indicators or questionable methodologies behind global

rankings, an AHELO-type tool would permit universities to better understand how well their students grasp certain subject material; the comparative thrust behind an AHELO would allow administrators to assess how well faculties and students perform in the context of like institutions, thus offering students a more comprehensive basis for choosing a particular university or program of study.

Why would universities choose to participate in a transnational study like AHELO? Most universities do consider learning outcomes as part of their internal review and quality assurance processes, assessments which tend to be developed endogenously and tailored to the university (technical, vocational, liberal), its particular programs and its disciplines. Participating in transnational studies may require the mobilization of new technologies, new assessment frameworks, and prompt uncomfortable conversations around the quality of teaching and learning and priorities of university governance.

Furthermore, transnational studies of this scope are administratively demanding: the OECD is a large international bureaucracy where projects require the convening of institutional authority (Harmsen and Braband, 2019); where financial resources can be scarce (especially during economic recessions); and where the development of technical instrumentation is a laborious and expensive process involving multiple committee meetings, workshops, and conferences.

Universities may completely circumvent the OECD in future iterations of an AHELO-type instrument - although the prestige, data analytics and global networking associated with OECD work may diminish these prospects on a global scale. The last



Chair of the IMHE argued that such an important transnational project would be better executed in the hands of private (non-state) actors unrestrained by the blurred lines of budgetary and governance authority characteristic of inter-governmental, cross-institutional work. This point about a more direct and “reliable” link between universities and innovative private education service providers was reinforced by a member of the ACER consortium who, a subject matter expert himself with several years of experience working on international comparative projects, wondered why universities were having to “work around” the OECD rather than work “directly with ACER” (personal interview, ACER: March 2013).

The OECD is well positioned to conduct comparative education projects of this complexity and scale. Since the early 1990s, OECD has expanded its regime of international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) to cover primary and secondary education (PISA), university and post-secondary education (AHELO), and adult skills and competencies (PIAAC). The OECD’s vast body of technical expertise and statistical analysis, its forum for best practices from different national governments and a penetrating knowledge network spanning member and non-member states provides a great deal of cognitive legitimacy in the realm of higher education assessment. After a more sustained look, it is clear why university administrators, *as important political actors*, seek to buttress their decision-making through such epistemic authorities.

The reasons why university administrators seek out these kinds of comparative assessments may include the perceived and actual limitations and shortcomings of global

rankings; the idea of “globally belonging” and the prestige and anticipated benefits of being part of collaborative, or peer-reviewed, benchmarking activities offered by the OECD; better understanding trends and economic pressures associated with an increasingly entrepreneurial academic culture in which certain disciplines offer a better return on investment than others; and the internationalization efforts that accrue through meaningful and transparent participation with like institutions in a global context. Finally, it is critical for administrators to strategically prioritize the vision of a university in a rapidly-evolving policy environment where indicators are linked (discursively and empirically) to national and global knowledge economies.

The university - and its administrators, faculty and students - thus emerges as an important though overlooked site of political authority and contestation in global education. A transnational study like AHELO mobilizes certain discourses of legitimacy within the university through which different actors either confer epistemic authority or challenge that authority. This contestation over legitimacy unfolds from university boardrooms and faculty meetings up to the highest level of global governance, the OECD Secretariat.

### ***Arresting global education neoliberalism?***

A third significant finding from my dissertation is that an authority-legitimacy gap in global education governance has created space for universities to exercise political authority over comparative data. Pouliot (2020) argues that states seldom accept IO epistemic authority de facto and without reservation; similarly, my empirical research into

AHELO suggests institutional representatives, coalescing in the IMHE, critically interrogated the OECD's scope, purpose, and ultimate goals attached to AHELO.

The IMHE General Conference in September 2012 revealed that some university administrators and faculty upheld an alternative vision for global education. "The creation of standards mean there is always a reductive bias, and you are imposing from the centre a hierarchical tool that is not value-neutral. Managerial approaches will get quick results, but it is the process of researching, of sending out graduate students for intercultural exchanges and building research communities that, although they take longer (perhaps a generation), this is the way to achieve results" (interview, OECD/IMHE: September 2012).

Despite the OECD's discursive dissemination of its human capital narrative students across the more economically developed OECD countries withheld their participation in AHELO. Faculty responses were uneven and hypothesized to correlate more to deep-seated concerns over emerging quality assurance reforms that would fundamentally impact classroom instructional content, design, delivery, and external assessment.

Wendy Brown (2015: 195) persuades us that "public-university faculty are poorly positioned, intellectually and organizationally, to fight [neoliberal] trends" impacting higher education. The AHELO study challenges this narrative. Faculty resistance echoed within the IMHE, and concerted resistance from UC-ACE led, in part, to the OECD's decision to withdraw its proposal for a main study.

Yet IMHE's dissolution in 2016 also supports Brown's perspective that neoliberalism has radically undercut the organizational basis for a more democratic, representative vision for (global) higher education.

***Policy failure or an authority-legitimacy "gap"?***

Harmsen and Braband (2019) decisively dismissed the AHELO feasibility study as an example of organizational failure: the inability of a "compound bureaucracy" (Trondal et. al, 2013) to convene competing lines of authority in order to advance a main study. This discourse/organizational analysis reveals only a partial truth into the *processes* undergirding policy implementation.

AHELO's "failure" in fact reflected a competition for authority and legitimacy across multiple scales of governance. A governance fields perspective approaches policy failure through a relational ontology; that is, failure is not absolute but a result of the competition for recognition between actors ascertaining a position of authority within the field.

This approach explains how the OECD was able to achieve AHELO's proof of technical concept for its feasibility study while failing to convene practical or political legitimacy for its main study. Technical experts in education assessment successfully designed internationally-calibrated frameworks and testing instruments, and quality assurance regimes enacted novel inter-jurisdictional networks.

And while these actors commanded a superordinate position of authority in the discourse of evidence-based management in higher education, they were unable to

convene the moral legitimacy required from key stakeholders in the global governance of education: students and faculty, *homo oeconomicus*, on behalf of whom AHELO was ostensibly launched.

Despite AHELO's ambition to counterbalance the global rankings regime by identifying learning gain (e.g., value-added), this imaginary of reputation required a substantial increase in the student and institutional sample size. The OECD's pragmatic legitimacy - the belief held by others that the OECD was, indeed, the appropriate actor to counterbalance a "biased" rankings regime - could not be reconciled with its authority claims. In this way my dissertation recognizes a significant authority-legitimacy gap at the global level.

The Mexican case study was emblematic of a significant authority-legitimacy gap at the subnational level. The big, autonomous, "mature" universities were authorized by the Government of Mexico to lead the AHELO study and to enrol smaller, less prestigious universities as participants. Mexico's enthusiastic response to AHELO mirrored efforts to govern an emerging culture of assessment shaping Mexico's higher education reform. University participation was critical in this regard. The OECD's neglectful governance throughout phase 2 of the feasibility study shattered the legitimacy claims of Mexico's leading universities.

The authority-legitimacy gap was less perceptible at the transnational level. My research identified novel transnational networks established by quality assurance agencies and government ministries in "like minded" jurisdictions - Canada (Ontario), Australia

and Japan, in particular. Despite the OECD's "questionable," inaccurate and unreflective results in the feasibility study, its legitimacy for conducting a global study was never seriously interrogated by these actors. Instead, the OECD presented new opportunities to expand on ideas developed through the study.

While these variable authority-legitimacy gaps reveal a fragmentation (Biermann et al., 2009) in the global education governance architecture, they also provide a more useful way of analytically engaging with policy "failure." Where a significant authority-legitimacy gap may precipitate a type of policy failure at the global or subnational scale, a narrower gap may forestall the perception of failure at the transnational scale.

### **The "AHELO" effect on global governance**

Despite the dissolution of the IMHE in 2016 and the failure of the AHELO study to find a home in the OECD's "family of assessments," there are indications the research activities generated from AHELO resonate in other studies within the OECD's Directorate for Education and Skills. The Higher Education Policy Team, through which all the OECD's higher education work is currently organized, "carries out analysis on a wide range of higher education systems and policies."<sup>117</sup> This body is governed by the Education Policy Committee, which itself is advised by a Group of National Experts on Higher Education (GNE-HE) composed of experts nominated by OECD countries.

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<sup>117</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/higher-education-policy/>

Two features distinguish this body from the IMHE. First, its mandate is explicitly country level, policy driven and outcomes-oriented. The Higher Education Policy Team reports to the EDPC and its “public bodies” - quality assurance agencies and education/economics ministries nominated in the GNE. Second, there is no institutional representation outside of “other specially invited experts” - universities and their administrators, faculty and associations are no longer represented.<sup>118</sup> There is thus a discernible break in the institutional culture surrounding higher education policy development in the OECD.

A recently-launched initiative called the Labour Market Relevance and Outcomes of Higher Education (LMRO Project) is based on the human capital orthodoxy that drove so much of the policy interest in AHELO. This study - launched in 2018 with initial participation from Norway, Mexico, the US (four states), Austria, Hungary, Portugal and Slovenia - “aims to help governments and higher education institutions (HEIs) enhance the employment outcomes of graduates by better aligning higher education provision and labour markets.”

The LMRO Project employs contextual dimension questionnaires of the kind sampled by the AHELO study when it sought to determine a way to measure the value-added of university education. Interestingly, however, the LMRO Project seeks to examine the weight of “alternative credentials,” digitization, and the use of big data in the range of skills required by employers. So while the OECD navigates increasingly novel

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

higher education terrain, drawing on its epistemic authority to carve new imaginaries of reputation, universities and their “traditional” disciplinary knowledges will be measured against ever more sophisticated proxies of learning gain.

The global education governance field reveals a constellation of actors, rationalities and technologies underpinned by a challenging integration of technical expertise, governmental authority, and university agency and legitimization. My empirical investigation into AHELO permits broader theoretical insight into global higher education governance. Indeed, comparative assessments like AHELO that tease out the value-added of higher education reveal a critical role for subnational actors in the politics of education. Technical experts in higher education provide policy makers with tools to assess learning outcomes; thereby, these experts possess significant epistemic authority in shaping the integration of quality assurance tools into the higher education landscape.

Empirically, my study reveals that complex processes of integrating global assessments are in fact contingent on the convening of sources of authority and legitimacy across multiple scales of governance. Theoretically, my dissertation expands and contributes to the academic literature on global higher education governance by accounting for a greater range of actors that includes university administrators, faculty and students. Importantly, my study illuminates *how* multiple sources of technical, governmental and academic authorities interact in various national contexts to produce localized expressions of “global” education initiatives.



## **Appendix A: Letter of Information and Consent Request for Interview Participants**

**Background note:** *This letter of information was provided to (potential) interview respondents after they had signalled their interest, via email, in participating in my research study. The letter was sent by email and consent signatures obtained prior to the interviews.*

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### **Purpose of the Study**

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is launching a new study called the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO), which attempts to develop a comparative framework to measure the learning outcomes of university students in several disciplines, including Economics and Engineering.

The purpose of this cross-national and cross-cultural project is to determine what and how students learn in preparation for entering the global knowledge economy. AHELO represents one of many internationalization strategies that countries from across the world will develop in partnership with the OECD and other international (and national) partners.

The purpose of my study is to better understand the following:

1. How experts are selected in determining cross-national learning outcomes;
2. The consensus-building process between stakeholders in the AHELO project (OECD experts, private contractors that manage the project, national government representatives in charge of implementing the project, and the universities and higher education institutions where this project is in fact being implemented);
3. The importance of non-member countries to the OECD's work in higher education governance and in the OECD's more general mandate to work for the economic benefit of its member states;
4. How the multilevel governance structure of the AHELO helps us understand how global governance works, and how it is changing.

### **What will happen during the study?**

My research examines the development and administration of the AHELO program at several levels of governance: the transnational and global (OECD and the international contractors), the national (government departments), and the subnational levels (universities).

The purpose of my interview with you is to better understand your role and your organization's role in the AHELO program. The interview should take no longer than 45 minutes. Unless you

have any objections, I would like to record the interview so that I can focus more on listening to you.

**Are there any risks to doing this study?**

Like in most social science research, there are social risks associated with this study that you should know about. For example, there is a risk that other people may guess your identity because of the information you give me, your position in the organization, or your distinct views on the subject matter. This may affect your social status or reputation.

I will do my best to avoid these risks by ensuring your information is on a “not for attribution” basis, which means your information is confidential and you will not be linked by name to the information you provide me (unless you consent to being identified by name).

Also, please don't feel the need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. You can withdraw (stop taking part) at any time during this study, although withdrawal will not be possible once the research is submitted to my university for review or publication. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

**Are there any benefits to doing this study?**

Because of the special knowledge you have about the AHELO, your participation in my study is very important. The current literature in global governance and public policy does not do a very good job of explaining how AHELO works. With your help, my research will shed light on the OECD's strategy for engaging non-member economies through higher education programmes like AHELO and attempt to understand the role of state and non-state actors in this process.

**Confidentiality**

You are participating in this study confidentially. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. No one but me will know that you participated unless you choose to tell others. Please remember that we are often identifiable through the stories we tell.

Therefore, I am not able to guarantee your confidentiality if others guess your identity based on your unique knowledge.

The information you provide, and the transcripts of our interview(s), will be kept in a locked cabinet where only I will have access to it. The transcripts will be kept on a computer and will be protected by a password. Once the study has been completed, the data will be destroyed.

**What if I change my mind about being in the study?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; it is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can stop (withdraw) from the interview for whatever reason and at any time until approximately January 2014, or until I submit my dissertation for review. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise.

**Information about the Study Results**

I expect to have this study completed by approximately December 2014. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

**Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me by email at [smiths66@mcmaster.ca](mailto:smiths66@mcmaster.ca).

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and has received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

**McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat**  
**Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142**  
**c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support**  
**E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)**

## CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Scott Smith, of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until approximately January 2014.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Your name:** \_\_\_\_\_

I agree that the interview can be audio recorded (circle one).

Yes      No

Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to this email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Or to this mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview, and understand that I can always decline the request (circle one).

Yes      No

I can be contacted at this email address: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix B: Email Recruitment Script**

**Date:**

**Email subject:** Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) Interview

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

My name is Scott Smith, a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

I am writing to you to request an interview in connection with my SSHRC-funded doctoral research on the OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) feasibility study. My project examines how technical, managerial and political authority for this study impacted its implementation in different countries. I obtained your name and contact information from [the list of AHELO participants released by the OECD / a referral by \_\_\_\_\_].

The interview should take between 30-45 minutes and can be conducted during the AHELO conference in Paris between 11-13 March, 2013, where I will be attending as a participant. I am also happy to schedule an interview over the phone if you prefer.

For this interview I would like to ask you more precisely about the consensus-building processes behind the AHELO study. I would like to get a sense from you about the kinds of issues that framed the governance priorities of the AHELO study and how these priorities, in turn, impacted the study's country-level implementation. More information about my study will be provided in an information letter to be sent following your consent to the interview.

The interview will be on a not for attribution basis, in that any material used will not be attributed to you by name, unless you specifically indicate a willingness to be quoted by name. Interviews and interview material will be stored and identified by respondent number - rather than your name. I would personally prefer to record the interview because it will allow me to focus on our conversation rather than on taking notes! But if you object to the recording of the interview please let me know.

Of course, this project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board - details on data storage and other safeguards are included in an information letter and consent form that I will send separately. Transcripts of recorded interviews (if you consent to a taped interview) and interview notes will be stored on a password protected computer.

I look forward to your positive reply to my request for this interview.

Yours very sincerely,

Scott Smith  
PhD Candidate (ABD)  
Department of Political Science  
McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4M4 Canada

### **Appendix C: Guiding Interview Questions**

**Student Investigator:**

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This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and has received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

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**Guiding interview questions:** Below is a list of potential open- and closed-ended questions to guide our interview into AHELO's project design and implementation. You may notify me before or during the interview if there are questions you do not feel comfortable answering. Please do not feel compelled to answer my questions. The wording or sequence of the questions may not follow the order described below, and additional follow-up questions may be asked.

1. Please describe your position or role in your department/organization/institution.
2. How did you first become involved in AHELO?
3. What would you describe as AHELO's principle goals?
4. Whose interests does an AHELO study chiefly serve?
5. How would you characterize the cooperation between different countries in the IMHE?
6. Are you satisfied with the way in which experts were selected/nominated for AHELO?
7. How would you characterize cooperation between different experts in the AHELO study?
8. Do you feel the contractual arrangements (Terms of Reference) reflect the interests of the Secretariat and the member states?
9. Did all of the countries in the study understand the goals and the limitations of the AHELO data?
10. How do you feel about the direction of IMHE?
11. Please put this into simple terms for me. Help me understand how it's possible to create a methodological framework to measure learning outcomes across different cultures?

12. How are “value-added” measurements to be developed? What is the importance of these kinds of measurements in understanding how students learn, how teachers teach, and how institutions develop skilled graduates?
13. What is the role of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) in conceiving the AHELO feasibility study?
14. Do you foresee the participation of an increasing number of non-OECD countries in future studies?
15. Are you satisfied with the AHELO study?
16. What, in your experience, is the future of international assessment instruments in higher education policy?
17. Is there anyone else at this conference you feel I should speak with regarding AHELO?

*\* Some of these questions had to be translated into Spanish with the NPM team from Mexico. Translation was done by one of the NPM team members who possessed fluency in both English and Spanish.*

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