

## INFORMAL MEETING OF OECD EDUCATION MINISTERS ON EVALUATING THE OUTCOMES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

*Session 1: Friday 11 January 16h30*

### **Opening remarks by Aart de Geus**

On behalf of the OECD and Secretary-General Angel Gurría I would like to welcome you all to this informal Ministerial meeting. And on behalf of all of us I would like to thank Minister Tokai and the Japanese authorities for offering us this opportunity to share ideas and experience on an important but difficult set of issues.

In our lifetimes higher education has grown from being the preserve of an intellectual - and sometimes social - elite, to become a necessity for the majority of young people seeking to enter the labour market and participate in society. It is moreover the most significant driver of economic growth.

Research, both fundamental and applied, is the lifeblood of innovation and a source of hope for the future of our species.

And higher education institutions sustain culture and foster economic and social development in every part of our countries.

We no longer speak only of universities but of higher education systems comprising a wide diversity of institutions.

That much perhaps we can all easily agree on. But these different outcomes are not always well understood, and they are certainly not equally valued. That in itself can present problems. But effective evaluation is not simple.

Some of you have supported initiatives to evaluate different aspects of higher education. We will hear about some of these. I suspect we will learn that these efforts are not always easily introduced or welcome in their implementation. Evaluation is technically complex, and even where there is goodwill, the

administrative burden can be heavy. And where there is apprehension or suspicion of evaluation, the bureaucratic burden can become an excuse for inaction.

Governments may wish to use evaluation to encourage certain behaviours –that is a political choice. But once that choice has been made they need to be very sure that the measures adopted and the incentives they induce do indeed encourage and foster the desired behaviour. We have seen this in sectors other than education. Institutions quickly learn how to game the system, especially if there is money at stake. And if there is nothing at stake the exercise may not be taken seriously

Our extensive and diverse higher education systems cost money. In some of our systems this money comes almost entirely from the taxpayer. In others it is primarily from the students. The source of funding is not our concern today – but how effectively it is used.

Maybe in an ideal world we could afford to support higher education without giving thought to what that money is buying. But we do not live in an ideal world, and you do not need me to tell you that you have to compete with Ministers of Health, of Pensions, of Defence, for a share of spending.

The outside world too is paying a great deal of attention to the relative merits of different universities. Rankings are good business for newspapers and magazines in many countries. They are filling a vacuum in consumer information. And some of them are very well done.

International rankings are fewer in number, but in some countries they are having a disproportionate impact. They are not based on a scientific understanding or assessment of the quality of education, but on research output or reputation.

We need to do better than that and ensure that the quality of teaching and learning, and the broader outcomes of higher education, are taken into account. This does not mean measurement for the sake of measurement, but valuing what higher education does more fairly.

We have not invited you here to make any decisions. This meeting is not a negotiation. We want you to have the opportunity to learn from each other about your experiences. And I hope you will help us to understand some of the politics of reforming evaluation.

Later in the meeting we will discuss the advice we have received from experts about international comparisons of learning outcomes, and seek your reactions.

I would like to close by acknowledging the leadership shown by Japan in bringing us together here. Higher education in this country is going through a period of sustained reform which will I hope provide a lesson for all of us. I am looking forward eagerly to hearing more.