

Benchmarking e-Learning in UK higher education

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In early 2006 a new programme was launched aimed at benchmarking e-learning development across the UK higher education sector. The programme represents an early stage in the Higher Education Funding Council for England ten-year e-learning strategy, acknowledging the need to take stock of progress. This paper describes the background to the benchmarking programme, its approach, and some findings from the pilot.

Keywords: organisational change, ICT policy, benchmarking

Introduction

The UK-wide higher education benchmarking exercise began in January 2006. The background to the programme is contained in the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) strategy for e-learning (HEFCE, 2005), published after a consultation process with the sector that took place in 2003. The consultation was characterised by the sector's reaction at that time to the high profile given to the UKeU (UK e-University) and many of the consultation responses seemed to be asking for a renewed focus on the e-learning provision on the sector's campuses. This is where the need for benchmarking the current state of play in the HEIs was first expressed. There was a strong feeling that the whole UK HE sector should pause, take stock, and rethink its approach to e-learning.

HEFCE delayed publishing its strategy until 2005, when all issues concerning the failure of the UKeU had been addressed. The strategy document is surprisingly reflective, and acknowledges openly the influence of the consultation on its main principle, the support of individual institutions in developing their own approach to e-learning. It acknowledged that the early concentration on infrastructure had now given way to a focus on pedagogy, and on connecting electronic communications with other processes, in a new blend of approaches to learning and teaching. HEFCE concedes that those best placed to shape a pedagogy-based, flexible delivery approach, with e-learning fully joined up with other processes, are the institutions themselves, and the Funding Council's role is to provide as much support as possible to help HEIs design and implement that development. This, then, provides the fundamental rationale for the benchmarking programme, and it is expressed clearly in the following extract from the strategy:

The highest priority objective of our strategy is to enable institutions to meet the needs of learners and their own aspirations for development. We will achieve this by ensuring that our strategy is not prescriptive about the particular form or use that e-learning is put to in institutions, but supports institutions' own chosen e-learning missions. Linked to this, we will encourage and support institutions in setting their own e-learning goals, appropriate to their missions and state of embedding, and in measuring their own progress, by providing tools for benchmarking (HEFCE, 2005, p. 5).

A direct outcome of the implementation plan based on the strategy was to invite the Higher Education Academy (the Academy), in partnership with the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), to lead a UK-wide higher education e-learning benchmarking exercise.

The aims of the benchmarking exercise

The aims of the exercise are three-fold:

- to provide higher education institutions with the information to make informed plans for future larger scale institutional change and development
- to allow institutions to identify their current progress, on embedding e-learning, in relation to similar institutions

- to provide a picture of the sector as a whole in order to identify areas of strategic importance to inform the work of the JISC, the Academy and the Funding Councils, including the further development of the HEFCE e-learning strategy.

What is being benchmarked has been informed by the contexts and priorities of the participating institutions. The exercise has not been prescriptive about processes and tools, since the Pilot Phase of the initiative was designed to begin the process of clarifying institutional needs and setting boundaries. However, the benchmarks are providing both quantitative metrics and qualitative descriptors, with the latter providing an opportunity for the institutions to reflect upon and share their individual experiences.

Managing the benchmarking exercise

Following a call for expressions of interest in the initial phases of the benchmarking exercise in October 2005, nearly 60 expressions were received from across the sector. From these 12 HE institutions, one in partnership with a Further Education College, were selected to join the Pilot Phase in January 2006, with completion in July 2006. The institutions chosen to take part in the pilot were as representative of the diversity of the sector as was possible from those expressing interest. This resulted in a good spread of new and old, research and teaching intensive institutions and a good geographical mix, including representation from Scotland and Wales (the list of pilot institutions is given under approaches below).

The remainder of benchmarking exercise is then being phased as follows:

- in October 2006 around 40 institutions join Phase 1 of the exercise.
- from May 2007 Phase 2 will involve any other interested UK institutions.

A team of consultants were appointed by the Academy to work with institutions involved in the benchmarking pilot and provide support for further phases. The consultants helped to design, adapt and implement approaches and tools to meet specific institutional needs.

Approaches to benchmarking in the pilot

There was some early attraction to the idea that the greatest benefit for the sector would be gained by adopting a single benchmarking tool or method. One purpose of the benchmarking pilot is to provide the sector with the lessons from, and experiences of, several alternative approaches to benchmarking. These have been used to inform the decisions of the Phase 1 entrants to the benchmarking exercise. It was unlikely, however, that a single tool would be adopted across the programme since the institutions themselves have been encouraged to choose the method that is best matched to their profile and stage of development. In any case it is evident that benchmarking e-learning is a process that is itself rapidly developing with the nature of what is to be benchmarked.

It was agreed that the benchmarking exercise will be owned by the institution that undertakes it and was never conceived as a data gathering exercise on the part of the Funding Council, JISC, or the Academy. The whole exercise is developmental and should help to provide institutions with an opportunity to take stock, with the assistance of the Academy, of where they are in regard to e-learning, and should institutions desire it they can compare themselves to similar institutions.

During the Pilot Phase the institutions selected five differing approaches to benchmarking (Table 1). In the Pilot Phase the Academy wished to facilitate the flow and dissemination of information between participating institutions, between the Academy and institutions, and from all participants to the wider sector. As a result the Academy worked with the pilot institutions to build a distributed network of weblogs, one for each institution, one for each consultancy, and one for the Academy. The Academy and institutional weblogs were open for public viewing (at www.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/benchmarking/) whereas the consultancy weblogs were restricted access vehicles for communication between the consultants and Academy. Guidance notes on the use of weblogs to support of the e-learning benchmarking exercise were posted (HEA, 2006).

Table 1: The pilot phase institutions and approaches

Approach	Pilot phase institutions
ELTI (Embedding Learning Technology Institutionally) (JISC, 2003)	University of Bristol, University of Hertfordshire, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff
Pick and Mix Approach (Bacsich, 2006)	University of Chester, University of Leicester, Staffordshire University
The Observatory of Borderless Higher Education Approach (OBHE, 2003)	Coventry University and Warwickshire College, Institute of Education, University of London, Oxford Brookes University, University of Warwick
MIT90s (Scott Morton, 1991)	University of Strathclyde
e-Learning Maturity Model (Marshall, 2005)	University of Manchester

Some issues in the pilot phase

There were a variety of issues that the Pilot Phase attempted to address:

- to establish a common understanding, among participating institutions, about what is meant by e-learning, embedding, and benchmarking.
- following on from this, if e-learning is embedded is it possible, easy, or desirable to try and isolate the exact contribution the 'e' made to the learning? If not, we end up not benchmarking e-learning at all, but something far broader.
- deciding on the most meaningful organisational unit for benchmarking: is it at institutional, faculty, school level etc?
- the extent to which the Academy should demonstrate leadership with regard to the direction of developing a diverse approach to benchmarking rather than 'champion' any single approach.
- to evaluate whether the 'constrained diversity' approach taken proved to be the correct one? The view taken was that a heterogeneous HE sector requires some degree of heterogeneity of approach.
- the extent to which institutions have prioritised development over comparison?

Evaluation conclusions and recommendations

The pilot exercise has revealed that institutions have found it more challenging than expected to assess with any real confidence the 'state of play' in e-learning, both within institutions and across the sector. On the other hand the process of trying to arrive at such an assessment has proved enormously beneficial to the institutions who have attempted it.

There was a widely-expressed view that all the benchmarking approaches adopted have been an important catalyst to institutional and community reflection and have acted as a starting point for a developmental process. The precise nature of the methodology has been much less important than the general process involved in starting to ask penetrating questions about e-learning in an institution. Two quotations from participants in the pilot neatly encapsulate the overall experience of the benchmarking pilot.

..the concept of benchmarking implies that we know what we're measuring, and that just isn't the case for e-learning. The more closely you look at it the more interconnected with everything else it seems to become, and the more difficult it is to assess its value to the student experience.

For the first time we've been made to think quite deeply about what we're doing – not just about how we support e-learning, but about whether we're deploying our limited resources in a way that really helps students learn (Mayes, 2006, p. 2).

According to the pilot evaluator, Mayes (2006), some of the main recommendations from the evaluation report are as follows:

1. The main model trialled in the pilot – consultants appointed to interface with individual HEIs and directly supporting the institution in its use of a method – should continue.
2. The main benchmarking methods trialled in the pilot should remain on offer and should be supported, though institutions should be encouraged to regard them as flexible frameworks for starting a process of tailoring benchmarking for their own requirements, rather than as tools to be operated.
3. There should be no attempt to impose a single benchmarking approach across the whole programme.
4. The attempt to develop a benchmarking framework for e-learning should continue in the main phase, as a programme wide activity.
5. All institutions should be given maximum opportunity to share their experiences with other HEIs in a small cluster of institutions following a particular method
6. The attempt to create a culture of sharing of issues and outputs across the programme should be built on in the main phase, with institutional weblogs more explicitly supported.
7. A role should be found in the main phase for those participants in the pilot who have offered their expertise for the main phase of the programme.
8. The issue of how to benchmark progress in e-learning across the whole sector should be addressed. A level of reporting must be agreed that is consistent with institutional confidentiality but also allows a detailed picture of progress in particular areas to be more visible than in the pilot.
9. Consideration should be given to the possibility of giving an explicit role in benchmarking e-learning to the Academy's 24 Subject Centres.

Beyond the pilot: Developing the e-Benchmarking framework

The team driving the e-benchmarking Pilot Phase witnessed the emergence of, what is hoped could become a generic e-benchmarking framework. This would be developed by identifying:

- Any commonalities/core elements and processes identified by the sector in the existing approaches to e-benchmarking that could be distilled / refined and supplemented by context-specific elements.
- The synthesis of the approaches to draw out the development/enhancement of an HE specific e-benchmarking framework, grounded in the student learning experience.

An e-benchmarking framework shouldn't be confused with a preference for any particular e-benchmarking or institutional review tool. A framework should clarify the point of the exercise: how to measure the enhancement that technology brings to the learners' experience. However, it is essential that there is time to develop sector 'buy in' and contributions.

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