

Benchmarking: The Work of Many for the Quality of All

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In Belgium, there are only two Higher Education Institutes (HEI) specialised in print media production and management. One of which is the Department of Graphical and digital media at the Artevelde University College (AHS) in Ghent. This small national presence is partly responsible for the interest of the department in establishing an international network of exchanges to improve the internal educational and managerial processes through a collaborative arrangement known as "benchmarking". To that end, the department is currently researching the operational implications and relevance of international benchmarking applied to its current programme and methods of work. This article undertakes first, to explain the working context of the department, then explains how benchmarking might be beneficial to the development of its programme and finally, outlines the variables thought to be critical to its success. It concludes with a short description of the experience of other AHS departments in implementing an international benchmarking exercise.

1. The context

Continuously coping with change and, consequently, the need to adapt current practices to meet new challenges, are on-going HEI preoccupations. The departments of communication technology - and print media production in particular - are thus no exception. On the contrary, the media sector is rapidly evolving in keeping with both technological developments and societal demands. At the same time, in a free market context of vigorous internal and external competition, print media companies are increasingly gearing up for export and transnational collaboration and trade. They consequently expect HEIs to prepare students for this intercultural work environment to ensure that their skill profiles correspond to the requirements of the jobs assigned to them.

"This powerful combination of globalisation, increased competition, technological and organisational change substantially increases the need to raise skills as consumer expectations rise and require ever more sophisticated and personalised products or services." [1]. As technology and skills evolve quickly, knowledge within an organisation must keep pace or a discrepancy will grow. Market demands evolve constantly and often extremely quickly. Very often, HEIs are expected to predict the future by preparing students for jobs that do not yet even exist (but will!). This underscores the need to strengthen the interface between HEIs, trainers and employers.

Additionally, print media (an integral part of the creative and communication industry) like the education and training functions of all HEIs - has changed drastically over the last decade as the following list illustrates:

- new curricula focuses increasingly on (internationally) agreed learning outcomes, with greater attention to generic and transversal key competences and to learners' needs;
- stakeholders (industry and students) are increasingly involved in the design and evaluation of educational programmes;
- modern methodological approaches to education are finding expression in both online and classroom teaching;
- more transparent, participatory assessment, reporting and evaluation procedures are being established;
- HEIs are responding to the need for international networks designed to promote student and lecturer mobility, new educational programmes and scientific research.

Together, the foregoing has led to increased pressure on all HEI staff - administrative, management and teaching - to continuously upgrade their skills and to show increased sensitivity to the individual and collective learning needs of the students attending their training programmes.

Print media education today is, therefore, a highly specialised field requiring both an advanced technology infrastructure as well as up-to-date professional expertise to organise training programmes. The financing of these programmes is not, however, always cost-effective: the small numbers typically enrolled inescapably result in diminished economies of scale and corresponding rising unit costs. Together, they partially explain the

rather limited number of European HEI-sponsored print media production courses.

The foregoing have increased the burden placed on HEIs specialised in print production to stay attuned and to reinvent themselves where and when necessary. Anticipation of future skill needs and translating them into manageable and effective learning programmes is not a job that can be done by a single institution. The continuous effort of many will be needed to maximize the quality education for all students. As a consequence, due to the specific challenges and context explained above, HEIs specialised in print media production often need to cross the border to seek peer support and to pool resources and expertise in order to cope with these challenges and demands. In Belgium, no other HEI is currently able to match the print oriented training programmes offered by the University College Artevelde (Ghent). One other Belgian HEI runs a programme in print media technology but the targeted skill profiles differ from those of AHS.

Because AHS believes that international benchmarking will leverage stronger peer consultation of HEI staff and more effective professional learning, it is vigorously exploring promising avenues for inter-HEI benchmarking.

2. Definition of (international) benchmarking

“The desire to improve through collaboration and comparison with other institutions of higher education (whether or not located abroad) is nothing new in a higher education setting. What is new, however, is the increasing interest in comparing institutions of higher education and formalising these comparisons via benchmarking.” [2] Benchmarking, therefore, differs substantially from ranking. University rankings are seductive, simple methods to chart the quality of institutes for higher education. On the basis of a number of parameters, each institute is awarded a score on the basis of which a list is drawn and a position assigned. Benchmarking, on the other hand, refers to a cooperative effort to identify best practices in a given field – e.g. improving foreign language instruction – and to create a conducive environment for peer learning.

International benchmarking is a systematic process whereby various entities (in this case, departments of universities) compare their characteristics, methods,

performances, outcomes in a non-threatening learning environment with comparable characteristics. During this process, each entity seeks to identify the variables considered most likely to impact on its functioning. Within the scope of comparison, the key processes (education, research and services) are included. This process of comparison focuses on ‘how to improve’ and intends to trigger and support implementation of good working practices.

3. Critical success factors

Empirically-supported conclusions suggest that a number of critical success factors determine the outcome of a benchmarking project.

3.1 Involvement and commitment of management and involved staff

Benchmarking can only lead to success if all stakeholders are motivated and committed to improve and change the organization. Thus, the existence of a culture as a ‘learning organization’ is critical and should buttress individual and collective efforts to evaluate and adapt the existing working practices based on new insights.

Benchmarking generally requires both time and resources. It is therefore important to guarantee the active involvement of all stakeholders, both management and employees who are involved in the project. Participation and having a say in defining the scope of the benchmarking process have a motivating effect on employees. In addition, one can also stimulate and increase employee allegiance through the introduction of small improvements (‘quick wins’) that can be identified through a limited comparison with the partners and that are implemented in one’s own organization.

3.2 Continuity and trust

Continuity and trust, achieved through open communication, are essential components of a good benchmarking. To maximize continuity and trust, planning for the continuity of this exercise beyond the specific time span of the project should be foreseen. To that end, it is recommended that the HEI in question make clear its commitment to the goals and methods of benchmarking, and, inter alia, to ensure that eventual changes in hierarchy or employees have no direct impact on

the project. The temptation is strong to assume that a good mutual relationship between a few enthusiastic colleagues is a sufficient guarantee of continuity. Experience in countless analogous efforts have furnished more than adequate proof that such hopes are misplaced: all too often, as soon as these early believers disappear, the project loses momentum and fails.

3.3 Quantitative and qualitative aspects of comparison

Although it is generally assumed that the conclusions reached in the study of "good practices" are underpinned by quantitative measures, figures are not necessarily the most appropriate performance indicators. Certain quantitative data may have been used as evidence to support the research findings but more often, the validity of quantitative measures is trumped by factors that cannot be quantified, factors such as, socio-cultural and legal circumstances that must be factored into the study if the study's findings are to be fully understood. Often, qualitative measures furnish a more reliable basis for assessing the effectiveness of benchmarking efforts. Hence, implementing the lessons learned from a qualitative comparison in one's own context offers the greatest chance of success.

3.4 Thorough preliminary analysis

It is important that the HEI or one of its departments first carry out a thorough preliminary self-analysis and look for opportunities for learning and improvement on the basis of internal quality assurance research. A thorough and conscious self-knowledge directs the search for appropriate benchmarking partners. Such an analysis should cover several questions. Among them are:

- A study of the degree programme's "internal efficiency" by which is meant the extent to which the degree programme achieves its own proclaimed programme goals;
- A study of the degree programme's "external effectiveness or productivity" by which is meant the extent to which the programme goals are consistent with the goals of the stakeholders (i.e. the professional field);
- A study of the vision and underlying assumptions on which the degree programme is based;
- A study of the resource requirements of the degree programme (human, financial and organizational);

- A study of the prerequisites on which the future success of the degree programme will be based;
- A study of the degree programme's monitoring procedures (frequency, how findings are used by the degree programme managers); and
- A study of the relevance/appropriateness of the measures used to assess the quality of the degree programme.

3.5 Partner choice

Along with a structured approach to setting up and developing a benchmarking project, the choice of the right partners is another key to success. A limited number (e.g. 2 to 4) of partners from different countries is more likely to favorably influence the success of the project and its continuity. Ideally, the partner institutions have a proven track record of cooperation and are familiar with the extent and quality of each other's expertise.

When choosing partners, comparability is an important factor: possible equivalence of the institutions (e.g. in terms of structure, size, goals, methods of work, approach to decision-making, etc.) or adversely by substantive mutual differences between the institutions.

3.6 Language

It is self-evident that the absence of a common language will constitute a serious impediment to effective planning and management especially when documents need translation. Although one can expect that many teachers have an adequate command of a second language, Flemish HEIs will generally use English as the medium of communication in the planning and evaluation of benchmarking projects. Documents and presentations used or produced within the framework of the project, therefore, will most likely be drafted in English. The existence of an institution-wide, internally organized translation service is arguably an asset but not necessarily a prerequisite.

4. Step-by-step plan for benchmarking

Benchmarking should not be initiated haphazardly simply because a potential partner expresses interest. Implementing an effective benchmarking project demands clear project planning and a step-by-step approach. One such possible approach is described below. It is essential that all partners within the project are in agreement with the proposed strategy and that the action plan is recorded in a cooperation agreement prior to its commencement. A formal but confidential memorandum of

understanding should set forth the basic considerations of the future agreement in order to ensure the timely exchange of relevant planning and management data between the benchmarking partners.

Benchmarking projects are no different than other institutional capacity building efforts in that they contain four discrete recognizable components:

1. Preparation
2. Implementation and comparison
3. Improvement
4. Evaluation

These four phases can be broken up in 10 steps (see Figure 1):

PHASE 1: PREPARATION

Step 1: Preliminary study

Before initiating a benchmarking project, it is important to carefully explore 'what' one wishes to achieve (see above: "thorough analysis") before contacting possible project partners.

An analysis of the opportunities for learning and improvement is the starting point.

Possible questions to be answered are:

- What does one want to benchmark?
- Where does one want to see improvements?
- What is one striving to achieve?

Step 2: Preparing the selection of partners

As noted earlier, choosing the right partners is crucial. It is better, starting from a preliminary study, to peruse the existing preferential partnerships of the university (college) and to collect information from specialised journals and internet sites so as to form a first idea of the policy, the vision and the organisation of potential partners. International professional federations can also furnish references, as can lectures, workshops or quality assurance conferences. Finally, audit reports drafted by external quality assurance agencies can be potentially useful sources of information. From the 'long-list' of possible partners who are found on the basis of the desk top search, a 'short-list' is then drawn up.

Step 3: Choosing benchmark partners based on the win-win topics

A first contact need not immediately result in a visit. Indirect sources of information are often the most cost-effective way of proceeding in the first instance. Subsequently, one can exchange information (via a questionnaire or by reviewing policy documents) to get a preparatory list of possible benchmark partners. A preliminary selection made, subsequent exploratory discussions can be started in order to discuss a first benchmarking proposal and to pinpoint win-win topics. At this point, the first selection of the potential partners in the project should have been addressed.

Step 4: Defining the scope

Once the identity of the partners has been agreed upon, one can work out the cooperation agreement and settle the envisaged scope. Emphasis must be placed on the continuity and confidentiality of the project.

PHASE 2: IMPLEMENTATION AND COMPARISON

Step 5: Defining the working method by means of self-assessment instruments

When elaborating the management procedures, the partners must come to an agreement on the specific monitoring and formative evaluation procedures to be used. Then, on the basis of the selected instruments, the partners turn to their own organizations to collect data on issues of mutual interest.

An essential part of preparing the identified benchmark must be to analyze the similarities and differences in the processes of (quantitative) data gathering to avoid comparing different contexts or analyses.

Finally, the partners report the results of their research. An agreement framework with regard to the reporting method is recommended in order to obtain consistent results from the various benchmarking partners.

Step 6: Exchanging the results

The exchange of the results is above all designed to stimulate discussion as a means of expanding and deepening the individual and collective understanding the goals and assumptions on which the design of the project is based. Revisiting earlier assumptions often leads to new insights for each of the participants.

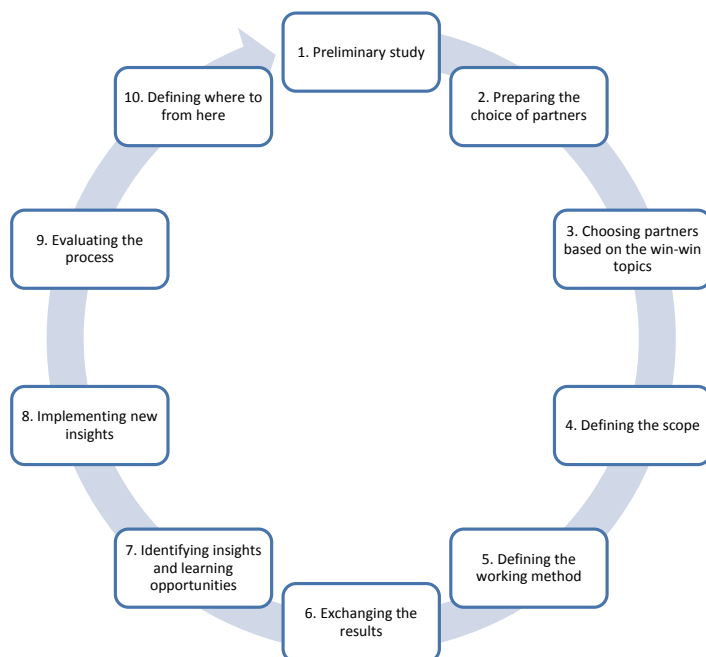


Figure 1: An effective benchmarking project in 10 steps

Step 7: Identifying insights and learning opportunities

Sharing one's own planning assumptions with the partners will not only reinforce the institutional partnership on which so much of the future success of the programme will depend but open the door to new insights. Potential obstacles that might arise or indeed have already done so in one's own context can be discussed in a wider forum and perhaps be resolved thanks to the experiences of other partners.

PHASE 3: IMPROVEMENT

Step 8: Implementing new insights

New insights are converted into proposed actions and implemented in one's own organisation. The results of this implementation are also communicated to the partners, so that they too can validate the added value of the project.

The success of these new actions of quality enhancement will depend greatly on the ability not to duplicate

but to adapt the lessons learned to the particularities of the own working context.

PHASE 4: EVALUATION

Step 9: Evaluating the process

The project is evaluated both in one's own institution and with the benchmarking partners. During the evaluation, both the incentives and the possible obstacles which have been experienced along the way are identified. The reflection focuses on both the benchmarking procedure and the specific implementation process.

Step 10: Defining where to go from here

The results of this internal evaluation are shared with the partners and will be part of any further course of the benchmarking project, agreed upon with the partners. A new benchmarking round can be initiated and one can ponder (joint) publication of the project results, taking into account the stipulations of the confidentiality memorandum.

5. What do our colleagues say?

Three departments of the AHS are in the process of benchmarking or have recently concluded their work. All agree about the favorable aspects of it but also enter some caveats to the debate. The lessons learned are now or will, it is hoped, be a source of inspiration to others. What propelled the project? What proved to be hindrances or pitfalls slowing down the project implementation pace?

Regarding the driving forces:

- Two joint consultations a year are the absolute minimum in the way of expectations! While skypeing or conference calls are useful to resolve managerial questions calling for a rapid solution to a problem, they cannot replace face to face meetings which ensure everybody remains committed and adheres to the agreed work plan.
- One partner has to take the lead and to coordinate the entire process up to and including the filing of regular progress reports.
- Put all the prior agreements on paper and do not hesitate to refer to them when necessary.
- All the institutions involved deserve and must be accorded due respect as regards both their modus operandi and the institutional structure within which each operates.
- Go for a limited number of themes. This enables each partner to share, to learn and to get recognition. This two-way approach of 'give and take' is a good setting to generate commitment, mutual appreciation and critical reflection.

Regarding the impediments:

- It is a time-consuming effort not only to carry out the project but also to find agreement on the objectives and to understand the various working contexts.
- It takes a lot of time to develop a common understanding and to come to an agreement on the terminology to be used within the framework of the project.
- Copying others may be very tempting but it is important to remember that the work context of

the partners often differs so much from one's own that uncritical copying runs a high risk of failure. The purpose of benchmarking lies primarily in the joint exploration of the isolated and collective reasons that explain the varying degrees of success of the programme and of identifying those variables found to be critical to its successful implementation.

Finally, some advice:

- A joint conference at the end allows the project partners to aggregate data and to publicize the results. Moreover, it promotes (self)esteem as well as the respect of one's peers for the results achieved.
- Including external partners adds value, challenge and expertise to the project team and the views they develop.
- But above all, benchmarking reinforces partnerships, recognizes strengths, supports professionalization of staff and fuels their mobility.

6. Conclusion

Benchmarking as defined above, seeks to create and/or improve a non-threatening learning environment for HEIs to compare their performances and outputs. It enables HEIs to share their experience and expertise with a view to improving their key processes. This process of peer learning and teaching enhances professional networking and encourages partners to recognize the value of their individual and collective expertise.

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