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### How does quality assurance make a difference?

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#### Title: Benchmarking, an appropriate tool for decision-making and improving or just hype?

#### Abstract:

In 2011-2012 Higher education institutions in Flanders started a benchmarking exercise. All of them are members of the KU Leuven Association. The ambition was to build expertise in benchmarking according to the ESMU definition and approach which focuses on benchmarking as a voluntary and collaborative process with the aim to learn and self-improve. During one year participants worked together to decide upon the theme (how to effectively handle results of surveys and performance indicators), to define the indicators, to set the benchmark, do the self-evaluation en develop action plans. This paper takes you through the process of benchmarking and discusses encountered challenges and benefits.

#### Text of paper:

In Flanders' higher education, signals are obvious: eventually benchmarking will become



one of the criteria for Quality Assurance (QA). This triggered Higher Education Institutes (HEI's) to initiate a benchmarking exercise as part of the so-called KONDOR project.<sup>1</sup> KONDOR stands for 'Een **K**waliteitssysteem inzake **O**nderwijs **O**ntwikkelen en **R**ealiseren' (*develop and realise a quality system for education*). This project has been carried out by the HEI's that are member of the KU Leuven Association, which unites the University of Leuven with eleven university colleges. With a special fund for educational development (OOF) the Association financed the KONDOR project. This project started in September 2010 and completed in August 2012.

Benchmarking is a concept with many definitions and an equal variety of possible approaches (Epper, 1999); (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2010); (Jackson & Lund, 2000); (Schofield, 1998). From the start, we decided against metric benchmarking, informal benchmarking or competitive benchmarking. It had to be more than that.

Literature supplies some useful definitions. The most interesting among them have some elements in common:

- It is about a voluntary and internal process (in contradiction with ranking);
- it is about collaborating and comparing; the final goal has to be to learn from each other and to improve the process.

In the end, we chose the definition of the European centre for Strategic Management of Universities (ESMU, 2008): 'The voluntary process of self-evaluation and self-improvement through the systematic and collaborative comparison of practice and performance with similar organisations.' This definition has been developed by and for HEI's and it contains everything we considered essential to benchmarking. In addition, the approach described in the ESMU *Practical guide and Handbook* turned out to be very useful and became the basis of our approach (ESMU, 2008); (ESMU, 2010).

At the beginning of the benchmarking exercise, a short survey demonstrated that the involved HEI's had limited experience and expertise with benchmarking. Therefore the first aim of the exercise was building expertise. So the exercise had to be designed in such a way that it would and could involve quality managers. The selection of the subject for benchmarking guaranteed this. In 2009, a gathering of quality managers from the association pointed out some issues everybody was still struggling with. One of these issues was selected to be the theme for the benchmarking exercise: 'How to effectively handle results of surveys and performance indicators.' Choosing this theme had some important advantages:

- It was of interest for quality managers;
- it was strategically important in the light of QA and accreditation;
- everybody was looking for answers one way or another.

However, there were also some important disadvantages. We will return to them later.

#### The exercise: call for participants

In May 2011, we launched our call for participants. In a presentation, we informed quality managers about the purpose and the expected engagement of participants. They were expected to engage at least two people, being the quality manager and someone from the program; they had to attend to every meeting; they had to do preparatory work in between meetings; and they had to be prepared to deliver all relevant information. We planned five day-long meetings: one each in October, November, December, March and May. These requirements were strict and raised questions. Is it necessary to have five meetings; is it necessary to have two representatives when everybody is complaining about lack of time and work pressure? Nevertheless, the call for participants turned out to be a huge success. Nineteen programs from eight HEI's wanted to participate. This led

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<sup>1</sup> The benchmarking project was supported by a working group. Members of this group were: Hilde Sels, Kempen University College, leader of the benchmarking project; Nine Hooge, Leuven University College, project researcher ; Kurt De Wit, *University of Leuven*; Reinoud Vandervelden, Limburg Catholic University College ; Kim Waeytens, Leuven University College



to a new challenge: How to manage a group this big? Would it be possible to perform the benchmarking exercise with so many participants?

#### The exercise: stage one

At the start of the exercise, participants were asked to sign a code of conduct. This ensured everybody was aware of the conditions. It also created a 'safe' environment where participants could exchange information without any risk of it being misused by other participants or by the project leader. All parties agreed upon the text of this code of conduct.

The actual exercise was performed in five stages. Each stage concluded with a daylong meeting. In the first stage, participants were asked to think about the theme, about the process of handling results of surveys and performance indicators in order to divide the general theme into smaller subthemes.

During the concluding meeting this information was put together and discussed. The group decided to benchmark three subthemes: effective analysis and interpretation of results; development of an action plan; and closing the circle, i.e. guaranteeing that also in the process of handling results there is a systematic evaluation and that there is a link with the strategic plan. Once the sub-themes were agreed upon, the participants worked together in three groups to make a long list of possible indicators.

#### The exercise: stage two and three

In stage two and three the group tried to develop a relevant set of indicators covering the domain of handling results of surveys and performance indicators. First participants had to reach a consensus about the final list of indicators narrowing down the long list they made in stage 1. In order to do this we provided them with some criteria for these indicators. They should be

- relevant;
- defined in a proper way;
- specific enough without being too specific;
- able to indicate relative performance levels and to be used to compare the participants organisations;
- realistic and the organisation should have a possible impact on them.

Besides all this, the complete set should be a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators and it should be able to provide a complete view of the performance of the organisation in the chosen subject.

This part of the exercise was hard. Many questions were raised; answers proved hard to find. The main questions/problems were:

- According to ESMU, the set of indicators should contain qualitative and quantitative indicators. In the long list, there were some attempts to introduce a quantitative indicator, but in the short list, these soon were removed because they were not relevant.  
E.g., one of the quantitative indicators in the long list was 'the number of surveys that lead to actions for improvement'. But what is the relevance? What does this tell you? In the end we did use some ratios, e.g. the percentage of surveys for which there is a communication plan.
- ESMU advises to consider the complete value chain. In the end in our project there was a clear focus on the process, not on input, output or outcome. This was partly due to the fact the project had to be completed within a year. Therefore the scope had to be limited.
- The group of participants consisted of quality managers on the one hand and people from a program on the other. This mix was most certainly an asset, but sometimes the dialogue between the two groups became difficult because they were not always speaking the same language.
- Participants were having difficulties finding the appropriate level of specification for these indicators. If an indicator is too specific, it will not be applicable in every situation; if it is not specific enough, people will not recognise their organisation in

it. There is no easy answer to this question.

E.g., one of the indicators covered the analysis and interpretation of survey results. Depending on the organisational structure of the HEI this analysis and interpretation is performed at a central level or at the level of faculties. Of course this had an impact on the definition of this indicator.

At this stage, it became clear it would have been interesting to attract an external expert to guide the group through this difficult task. Unfortunately, this was impossible.

Nevertheless the group reached a consensus within due time.

- For analysis and interpretation the consensus indicators were: professional level of the analysing team, the process of analysing and interpreting, communication of the results to stakeholders.
- For developing an action plan they were: the availability of decision criteria and targets, formulation of goals, the action plan itself.
- For closing the circle, these indicators were withheld: evaluation and adjustment of the tools used to measure, effectiveness of actions for improvement, link between actions and strategic goals of the program.

However, this was just part of the task. The next step was to elaborate the indicators further. For every indicator there should be a description of four levels of performance: basic, standard, good and excellent. The excellent level was the benchmark: the best possible performance. The standard level was what one might consider the normal level of performance. With that in mind the basic level would be less than satisfactory.

As an example, these are the descriptions of the four performance levels for the indicator 'communication of results to the stakeholders':

- Basic: the program informs stakeholders occasionally about results of surveys;
- Standard: in less than half of the surveys the program communicates towards the stakeholders about the results and the actions taken;
- Good: in more than half of the surveys the program communicates towards the stakeholders about the results and the actions taken;
- Excellent: the program always communicates towards the stakeholders about the results of surveys and the actions taken.

Again, this task really took a considerable amount of time. Because of time constraints and the size of the group it was not possible to finish this task with the group as a whole. Therefore, during the third meeting it was decided that the working group who prepared and coordinated the benchmarking exercise would make the last adjustments themselves.

Based on these indicators the working group also prepared scoring cards. These were meant for the participants to be used to score their program. Put differently: to decide the level of performance of the program for each and every indicator.

#### The exercise stage four

In between the third and fourth meeting, every participant had to compare their own practice with the levels of the indicators: they had to do some self-evaluation and scoring. The project leader who was present at the moment of the final scoring guided them in this process. Participants also indicated their ambition, i.e. the level they wanted to reach in the future. Finally they made a list of strengths and points of improvement. During the fourth meeting, the results of the scoring were presented. There were some remarkable similarities, e.g. concerning effective communication about results of surveys towards stakeholders; or the use of procedures for analysis and interpretation of the results of surveys. This resulted in low average scores for these indicators. On the other hand, for some indicators most participants showed good practices which resulted in high average scores for these indicators. For a third group of indicators there was more discrepancy between the scores of the participants.

During this meeting, participants also presented what they believed to be their best practice and there was enough room for discussion and asking questions.

#### The exercise: stage five



In the final stage participants had to develop an action plan based on the results of the benchmarking. Although we did not ask them to hand over this action plan, we know they developed some very specific actions for improvement.

During the scoring stage, everybody had to indicate their ambition for every indicator and the intended actions linked with it. Some of them appeared to be very popular: starting to work on elaborated targets and cutting edges for every survey and performance indicator; effective communication to all stakeholders; development of a procedure for analysis and interpretation.

In the last meeting, some of the participants talked about their experiences or presented a best practice more in depth.

#### Lessons learned

- The benchmarking exercise was initiated in order to build experience in benchmarking itself. One of the first lessons learnt is that it's necessary to have someone with benchmarking experience to support and advice the group. It is also a good idea to involve an expert in the domain of the subject being benchmarked.
- Nineteen programs participated in this exercise. Every participant had two representatives. The size of the group forced us to adapt the work forms in order to guarantee real involvement of everybody.
- The group consisted of a mixture of quality managers and program coordinators. These different backgrounds sometimes caused friction in the dialogue between the two groups.
- Especially during the stage of developing the set of indicators, the group needed guidance to find the right balance concerning the level of specificity and to formulate the benchmarks and the other levels of performance.
- Although a good mixture of qualitative and quantitative indicators is important, it is not always possible to reach this balance. In the case of this project, it turned out to be almost impossible to define relevant quantitative indicators.

#### What was good?

- The mixture between quality managers and program coordinators was a challenge, but it was also perceived as an asset and led to increased mutual respect and better understanding. Participants indicated they really learned a lot from each other.
- The stage of developing the indicators plays a very important role for the participants to get better insight in the processes with relation to the theme to be benchmarked. This might be the hardest stage in the exercise, but it is also the most important one to make sure the exercise becomes a success. Participants testified that in the end the indicators were relevant and provided a good image of the organisational processes.
- The use of the scoring cards really helped the programs to get an insight in where they stand.
- Participants testified that they were already working on an action plan. In fact, one of the participants acknowledged at the moment of the scoring that they already had taken measures based on what they learned during the exercise. This had a positive impact on their scores.
- The benchmarking process is very demanding, but it ensures that people really reflect on the subject: where are we now, what do we want to achieve, which aspects are involved...?

#### Challenges

- Benchmarking does not replace common sense: it is impossible to implement just good practices from others into your organisation. You will have to adapt whatever

- lessons learned to the specific context of your HEI.
- The rationale for the benchmarking must be very clear from the start. Benchmarking can be initiated for several reasons: accountability, optimising processes, quality improvement... In this paper focus was on the latter. Confidentiality is an absolute condition for a quality driven benchmarking exercise. If participants cannot rely on the group and be sure their information is kept safe and confidential, they will be reluctant to be as open as is necessary for a successful benchmarking exercise. Jäkel mentions some unintended side-effects of benchmarking, amongst others window dressing (Jäkel, 2012). These can be avoided if there is a strict confidentiality.
  - Benchmarking is not a ranking tool: benchmarking is an internal governance tool; ranking is a marketing tool (Gaetghens, 2012).
  - Benchmarking is not a goal in itself. It is just another instrument. Organisations should carefully consider the pros and cons before they participate in benchmarking. They also should carefully consider the best approach to benchmarking, given the theme selected. The approach described in this paper will not always turn out to be most efficient one. In 2010 Östling presented a completely different approach at EQAF (Östling, 2010).
  - Every step in the process is important and deserves equal attention. Due to circumstances, heavy workload and organisational changes, there might be pressure to skip certain steps. This can cause the exercise to become a failure.

### Sense and nonsense of benchmarking

If an organisation just wants to learn from another, benchmarking is too demanding a process. There are other techniques available that allow exchange of experiences and good practices. Benchmarking concerns a lot more than just learning from each other. It is a systematic, formal, analytical and continuous process. The aim is to formulate challenging, but realistic goals; to develop an action plan; and to identify good practices, organisational deficiencies and priorities for the future. Therefore benchmarking is a tool for decision-making. It leads to networking, collaboration and mutual respect; it leads to better performance; it leads to better understanding of processes and how to improve them; and it leads to the introduction of good practices.

Benchmarking should always lead to action. In a quality driven exercise the action plan is aimed at improvement. Because of the confidential character of a quality driven exercise it is not possible to use the results of the exercise for accountability reasons or external quality assessments. Nonetheless it will be possible to indicate that certain actions for improvement are based on the results of benchmarking.

Benchmarking is a very expensive and demanding tool. Therefore, it should be used only for strategically important issues. Then again, it should only be used if there is a real intention to learn and improve.

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#### **Questions for discussion:**

- Is benchmarking really a valid tool for quality assurance and decision-making or is it just another hype?
- If benchmarking is an internal process (as stipulated by ESMU) and results are confidential, how about external assessment and accreditation? Is benchmarking of no use then?
- Will it be possible to keep up the difference between benchmarking and ranking?
- Is it correct that depending on the theme of the benchmarking other approaches are in place?