

The national UK universities benchmarking e-learning programme

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Abstract

This paper describes key lessons learned from the UK programme on benchmarking e-learning in universities in four phases from early 2006 until the current work in Wales. The paper has a particular focus on Pick&Mix which started as just one of five methodologies originally piloted, but in the current phase is the only one used. Of the five methodologies, Pick&Mix is the one closest in concept to E-xcellence though different in detail – and since it was used in 24 institutions including members of EADTU the paper provides a useful comparative standpoint.

A particular challenge is to keep methodologies up to date yet provide continuity with the past. Pick&Mix now has criteria dealing with employers/employability and second-language issues as well as open educational resources. It also has features to map to international comparisons.

Since Pick&Mix is an “open educational methodology” whose specifications, methodological approach etc are in the public domain there are many lessons to be learned even for those not using that system.

Topics covered in the paper include creation and updating of criteria, alignment with national government and quality agency wishes, project management approaches, related resources needed, and making the best use of consortia.

The material draws on experience of the author with staff in over 40 institutions, across four methodologies, with insights from work in other sectors and countries.

Keywords: benchmarking e-learning, national initiatives, e-maturity, enhancement

Introduction

The Benchmarking e-Learning Programme for UK universities (and other HE institutions) was overseen by the UK Higher Education Academy (HE Academy) in partnership with JISC. It ran in three phases (Pilot, Phase 1 and Phase 2) and in total benchmarked 78 institutions. The main focus of Benchmarking was England but ten institutions were from other home nations of the UK. Benchmarking is the main focus of this paper.

Benchmarking was associated with a companion programme, Pathfinder, which facilitated and funded change initiatives in England only, at 37 of the benchmarking institutions, in two phases. Pathfinder is not the subject of this paper – Mayes and Morrison (2008) provide a useful overview of it and comparison with a similar Scottish programme. It is best to regard benchmarking as the first phase of Pathfinder (or a more general enhancement programme).

Benchmarking and Pathfinder have been followed by a Welsh initiative, Gwella, funding enhancement initiatives at all eleven Welsh universities. Since four of them had not been benchmarked, a component of Gwella is a first phase of benchmarking for the remaining four universities. That phase (phase 3 of benchmarking) is within the remit of this paper. More on Gwella can be found at <http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/gwella/>,

The number of institutions benchmarked, 82, and the number of phases, four, means that this programme is by far the largest in the world concerned with benchmarking e-learning in tertiary institutions in a participative way. A particular feature has been the rapid formative evaluations done of each phase so that adjustments could be made in time for the next phase.

Five different methodologies were proposed for the programme: ELTI, eMM, MIT90s, OBHE and Pick&Mix. Only OBHE and Pick&Mix were used in all three main phases of Benchmarking – and only Pick&Mix is being used in the Gwella phase. No new methodologies were allowed to enter the programme. Interestingly, Thames Valley University did use some E-xcellence criteria in its working (the MIT90s approach allows use of any criteria). The HE Academy wiki is a good entry point to material on methodologies – see http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/index.php/Methodologies_Index.

A key aspect of all phases of all programmes has been the use of consultants under contract to the HE Academy to act as specialist support for benchmarking and more facilitative “Critical Friends” for Pathfinder. Typically these consultants are no longer working in universities but many had senior management positions in the university sector.

The author's viewpoint

In any analysis of a programme, it is important to be clear about the viewpoint of the analyst. The author of this paper is the team leader of BELA, one of the two teams – BELA and OBHE – that oversaw each phase of the benchmarking programme. He is a consultant to the HE Academy, not a member of their staff. Nor is he the official evaluator of the programme. But he is the leader of the team who were directly and regularly in touch with the institutions that they looked after (42 out of the 82). Therefore he feels that his perspective is valuable from a standpoint of a balance between the general and the particular. He is also the developer of the Pick&Mix benchmarking methodology (Bacsich, 2008b) that has been used throughout all phases of benchmarking including currently in Wales. It was also the methodology used by the largest group of Open Learning Foundation institutions, six in all.

The paper is informed by regular close observation of and discussion with the institutions rather than “evaluation interviews”. The evidence base comprises the set of public documents and weblog postings created by (or on behalf of) the institutions, attendance at meetings (programme-level meetings, cohort workshops, meetings with individual institutions) and other informal contacts. The formative evaluation of Phase 2

The author is also grateful to his colleagues in BELA, especially his senior colleague Peter Chatterton and colleagues Bruce Carter, Dick Hill, and David Kay. However, his views are his own and not necessarily to be taken as those of any client, colleague or employer.

Glenaffric (2008) carried out the evaluation of Phase 2. BELA (Bacsich, 2008a) and OBHE (2008) wrote overview reports for their areas of activity.

EADTU relevance

Both UK institutional members of EADTU (Open University and London External) took part in the benchmarking programme. Other than these, 13 members of the Open Learning Foundation took part. Institutions associated with EADTU used all five of the methodologies. Interestingly, those associated with EADTU seemed more open to producing public reports (Derby, 2007; Teesside, 2007; and Northumbria, 2008).

Phase 2 benchmarking

The main part of this paper focuses on Phase 2 of the benchmarking programme. This is because the methodologies and the approach to using them have evolved through the earlier phases and the lessons for others are best learned from that phase. Unless otherwise mentioned, all discussion refers to Phase 2.

Seventeen institutions were supported by BELA – ten using Pick&Mix and seven using eMM. Due to lack of interest, no institutions used ELTI or MIT90s, which would have been supported by BELA if the quota had been met, set at four. (The OBHE team also supported a cohort of institutions, eleven in all.) All but three of the institutions were English; the others were Welsh. The three Welsh institutions in the BELA cohorts did excellent jobs and integrated well with English institutions. (They have now gone forward into the enhancement phase of Gwella.) Of the fourteen English institutions, nine were campus-based universities and three were “university colleges”. Two were distance learning providers: the Open University and the London External Programme, both full members of EADTU. Three others (Bangor, Northumbria and Salford) were members of the Open Learning Foundation.

Each of the institutions successfully set up a benchmarking team, followed one of the two methodologies, gathered data, and produced benchmarking outcomes in narrative and tabular (“carpet”) form. Only a few have produced public reports (Worcester, 2008; Northumbria, 2008) but this is not a requirement of the programme. Every institution, eventually, set up and ran a public blog linked to the public HE Academy benchmarking blog (<http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/benchmarking/>). All made some postings but the number and quality of postings was variable. Other communication technologies have also been employed including an email list for each methodology group (which was very popular) plus a, less popular, social networking system based on ELGG (<http://www.elgg.org/>).

The level of senior management involvement was in many cases high (in a few cases very high), and within the institutions the profile of the benchmarking activity has been high. In most cases the team met the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor/Deputy Vice-Chancellor and/or presented to the Senior Management Team – and in several smaller institutions they were called in to meet the Principal (equivalent to Vice-Chancellor).

Each group of institutions running a methodology joined in cohort meetings. These were held (by popular demand) four times for Pick&Mix and four times for eMM (including a two-day workshop). In addition, on the day after the main programme kick-off meeting there were briefing half-days for each methodology group – these were very successful. This feature was repeated for the Gwella benchmarking phase.

Changes in approach from earlier phases

Earlier phases of benchmarking – and both phases of Pathfinder – used an approach whereby each institution is assigned a specific consultant. Institutions value this and quickly “imprint” on their consultant. Consultants typically achieve a high level of credibility with institutions and have established good working relationships with them, so the institutions tell the consultants and the evaluators. However the scheme does not offer resilience against illness or overload conditions (in the scoring season the diary becomes almost unmanageable). Thus in Phase 2 a system of “lead and buddy” was used, not just to add resilience but also to provide a clearer demarcation of roles between support consultant and methodology advisor. (The resilience turned out to be vital in dealing with the planned absence of one consultant on paternity leave and the illness absence of another.)

There were also some other small adjustments for Phase 2. For eMM the methodology owner is Dr Stephen Marshall from New Zealand. Institutions are always keen to meet the benchmarking methodology owner and, in the nature of academia, they always have difficult questions which they feel only the owner can adequately answer – a situation not unlike that in the Moodle world. Thus Stephen Marshall was contracted to the team and made a visit to the UK near the end of the project – a very successful one. The situation was easier for Pick&Mix since the owner was on the team – but the “lead and buddy” system does allow the rest of the team to on occasion distance themselves from the owner if needed.

Another useful feature was that knowledgeable users of the methodology from earlier phases were contracted to provide a link back to university expertise. Both these modifications were popular and are recommended to other benchmarking programmes.

The Pick&Mix cohort had ten members – this created scheduling problems for meetings and agenda congestion within them – institutions had to demonstrate high skills in “elevator presentations” to communicate the range of information needed in the limited time. The eMM cohort had only seven members but eMM is a more complex methodology and the institutions were varied, so again there was agenda congestion to be handled.

One natural way of handling large cohorts is to split them into smaller groups. In theory both cohorts were subdivided into three groups. In eMM the natural split was into Welsh, Distance Learning (DL) and English members. The eMM institutions were not very keen on this arrangement as they felt it introduced a needless divide and although the DL eMM group did some joint work outside the cohort meetings the split was not sustained,

As a guideline, groups of around four to six are best. Four is ideal as it allows one to run a model with just four cohort meetings rotating round institutions – which fits neatly into benchmarking timescales and effort constraints. This is happening in Gwella.

There was much theorising in the early days of benchmarking that there would be rapid development of a “scholarship of benchmarking e-learning” – and to be fair to the institutions, some of the consultants who are or were academics encouraged this. In reality, research and scholarship require time for reflection, not to mention dealing with the constraints of conference and journal deadlines and timescales. It is usually some time after the work that the research presentations and papers appear – see the References for some.

The HE Academy set up in the early days of the programme a Benchmarking and Pathfinder wiki (<http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/>). With some exceptions, the wiki has remained largely in a mode of “one writes, many read”. Many do read – the pages that informal thinking suggests would be popular are the ones with the high read statistics. As for writing, benchmarking teams are like distance learning students in that they are very goal-directed, and contributing to general knowledge does not rate highly. (Interestingly, they have a strong preference for oral culture.) The author, as the main wiki writer in recent months, finds this mismatch disappointing but has no ready answer, not for this programme. As so often with collaborative work, careful design and assignment of the tasks must be the key. Thus one should not take this disappointing result as implying that other wiki-based projects, for example in EU projects, cannot be collaborative – and indeed recent evidence from the EU Re.ViCa project (<http://revica.europace.org/>) is that collaborative authoring can be achieved.

The engagement approach

The support consultant(s) made a number of visits to each institution, usually around four depending on need and logistics, and provided email and telephone support to the institution and its chosen methodology. On at least one of these visits the support consultant(s) would

have a meeting with the Pro Vice-Chancellor or other relevant senior figure, in some cases more than one meeting. In a few cases (as with earlier phases) the senior figure took an active part in the benchmarking team or its steering group, often chairing the scoring meeting – and in a few cases the Principal (in smaller institutions) also met the consultant(s).

It was surprising that the eMM institutions seemed happy with less visits from the support consultant(s) than the Pick&Mix institutions, given that the methodology is more complex. In part this seems due to the greater level of briefing and cohort meetings provided for eMM (including the two-day workshop) but also to the additional workload that eMM institutions reported, which led to very crowded diaries. There were also differences in the “dynamic” of scoring meetings and of benchmarking teams which seem in part to be caused by the methodologies and in part by the different institutional demographics (including size and style) of the two cohorts. For eMM the core benchmarking team tends to be a more specialist type of group and the scoring meeting is less participative and more reporting-based.

As in earlier phases, cohort meetings discussed topics of common interest, such as creating supplementary criteria or how to find evidence for criteria.

Both methodologies were also supported by a range of documentation. The general principles of each methodology were and are described in entries on the HE Academy wiki with links to key files describing different aspects. From time to time, blog postings on the HE Academy benchmarking blog alerted institutions to new information (<http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/benchmarking/>), as well as acting as a bulletin board for announcements of meetings. Such postings were normally also supplemented by group emails to ensure that institutions had several channels for notification of changes. In the case of eMM there is an extensive and long handbook; in the case of Pick&Mix a small set of key files with explanatory notes – as far as possible the aim in Pick&Mix has always been to keep things simple – and compact.

A group communication system called HELGA was provided for all institutions in the Benchmarking and Pathfinder Programme to use. (This is based on the ELGG open source system.) Neither the Pick&Mix nor the eMM cohort used it much but it did serve the purpose of providing a private group blog for both methodology cohorts, plus a files repository and a calendar tool. The calendar tool was a vital way of scheduling the nightmarish pattern of scoring meetings during the three-week “scoring season” – but was a bit tedious to use. (Now a number of institutions involved with Pathfinder are now using both Facebook and Ning – <http://www.ning.org/> – for group communication, rather than ELGG.)

Not for the first time in such programmes, the most successful tools were the two private email lists set up, one for each cohort. Though the consultants tried gently to discourage it, the lists were also used to send round attached files. This has been taken forward into Gwella.

The BELA consultants have made it clear that there are important lessons to be learned from earlier work on group communication tools that need to be taken into account for the future use of such systems in such programmes.

Some use was also made of audio conferencing for liaison with institutions and desktop video-conferencing for in-between cohort meetings, but a key conclusion of Phase 1 – that such tools needed standardisation and “embedding” in order to be really useful – would still seem to be the case. It may be that the UK is somewhat behind what is common practice now in EU-wide collaborations. In contrast, internet telephony became quite widely used, now that the interface to the public telephone system is more or less seamless.

Methodology issues

Compared with earlier phases, the reduction in Phase 2 to just two mature methodologies supported by BELA has allowed consultants and institutions to get more deeply into the details. While there are some very high-level similarities between Pick&Mix and eMM, and an increasing set of commonalities in the way that they are deployed (see later) there are almost no similarities at a detailed level. In particular eMM uses “dimensions” which means that each criterion has to be assigned five scores, not one; it also decomposes each criterion into a prescribed set of indicators, leading to complex spreadsheets.

The support cost in Phase 1 was lowest for Pick&Mix because the version used in Phase 1 was only a small update to that used in the pilot. In Phase 2 it was even lower – there were some more small updates at the beginning but when discussions started about a maintenance update the cohort members made it clear that they did not want any more updates in the middle of a benchmarking phase – not even clarifications. In consequence the new release of Pick&Mix was held back until later – it is just exiting its update cycle for Gwella. For eMM, the use (popular with institutions) of the methodology owner and his travel costs from New Zealand is another factor that makes the support costs of eMM much higher.

The benchmarking programme did not have as its prime purpose in any phase a controlled trial of the methodologies. However, in the view of the institutions and consultant support teams using them, both Pick&Mix and eMM proved to be fit for the purposes of the institutions who used them, although all required some tailoring to the individual circumstances of the HEIs using them. It is hard to draw detailed comparisons due to the non-overlapping institutional constituencies of the methodology cohorts, the base of Pick&Mix being in the post-1992 university sector and the base of eMM being in the research-led institutions – but as noted earlier two EADTU members have now used eMM and six OLF members have now used Pick&Mix.

In Phase 2, institutions took great advantage of the ability in Pick&Mix to select from Supplementary Criteria – indeed, some 25 such criteria were selected by one or more institutions, although only five were selected by four or more institutions. The selections gave good information on institutional priorities and their alignment (or not) with national priorities.

In contrast, all the eMM institutions decided to exercise and score all 35 processes, even after being advised that this was not necessary. Interestingly however, when it came to analyse their results, several “lensed down” the list of processes to a more manageable 15 or so. They tended to articulate their selection on the basis of focussing on those which were intrinsically about e-learning, rather than the ones “inheriting” their characteristics from general learning and teaching considerations. More cannot be said on this in a general paper on benchmarking – but a companion paper on eMM is in planning.

Some institutions, and advisors to them, still feel that the specific methodology is much less important than the general process involved in asking key questions about e-learning within an institution, especially in the context of external moderation. However, the number of institutions expressing such views to BELA was less than in previous phases.

It is still important for consultants to spend time making institutions comfortable with their chosen methodology (it is often chosen without deep analysis) and embedding it in their overall change management context. A key feature is the introductory briefing meeting on the specific methodology. This was done for Phase 2 and also recently for Gwella. In the case of eMM, the consultants ran a full two-day workshop a month later – another cause of the higher support costs for eMM.

As usual, a few institutions contended that both benchmarking methodologies contained and were constrained by implicit assumptions about good practice in e-learning. Normally these contentions did not stand up – for example in Pick&Mix it is relatively easy to craft new supplementary criteria based on different assumptions – very few did that. In the DL community there was a feeling in the early stages of Phase 2 that eMM would have to be modified to cope with distance learning providers – but by the end of the phase, a consensus was emerging from the two main such providers that this was not the case. However, there were a number of minor but energetic debates between the methodology owner, Dr Stephen Marshall, and institutions.

Whether or not eMM is a good solution for DL institutions in a wider world is not yet answered, and may not even be answerable. It should be noted that even within the methodologies deployed there are variant modes of engagement that have not (yet) been exercised in the UK. For example both eMM and Pick&Mix can be used in a more audit-based approach closer in methodology to quality agencies (though different in purpose). Somewhat further out, the MIT90s approach (used in Phase 1 by OLF members Thames Valley University and the University of Glamorgan in loosely coupled form) can be deployed in strictly coupled form (http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/index.php/Strictly_coupled) which brings it closer to both Pick&Mix (as a mutation with zero core criteria) and OBHE.

In the case of Pick&Mix, certain of the challenges in earlier phases lessened but some were still present to an extent – in particular over quality and learning material guidelines (especially for accessibility). In the case of quality, the discussion has benefited from the slow but steady increase in knowledge, understanding and acceptance of the QAA Precepts on e-learning (QAA, 2004). This suggests that such material does take time to percolate. In confirmation of this view, an active group on quality in e-learning has been set up as a spin-off of the Pathfinder programme – members include the Universities of Reading, Derby, and Teesside and two parts of the University of London including the External Programme. It is doubtful that this would have happened earlier. A challenge in a European context is to ensure links of this work to the ongoing European-level work on quality in e-learning.

In the case of learning material, one cause of the change is likely to have been the new TechDIS (2007) briefing material, widely distributed. This sets accessibility within a wider and arguably more relevant context of “accessibility for all”, much closer to usability guidelines.

Of course, ideas about good practice are constantly evolving. Thus a “living” benchmarking methodology has to contain some flexibility so that it can adapt and develop – within some constraints, of course. For example, in Phase 1 several new Supplementary Criteria were added to Pick&Mix, mostly generated by institutions in dialogue with the consultants. In contrast in Phase 2 there was counter-pressure from institutions to stabilise both methodologies. It is likely that one cause for this was that it was a little too early for some of the new ideas (web 2.0) to have got beyond the early adopters into management circles. Interestingly in Gwella, new criteria are being added to Pick&Mix to cover Work-Based Learning (the “Europe of skills” agenda), web 2.0 and new approaches to libraries – but although some pressure is coming from other institutions, the main driver has been that the Funding Council (HEFCW) has mapped some of these issues into its high-level indicators.

There has been an increasing trend in the amount of comparative benchmarking over the phases, but it remains at a low, and some would say discreet, level. In the pilot phase a couple of institutions did some desk research on competitive benchmarking but the BELA institutions did not meet in a cohort. In Phase 1, institutions in each BELA methodology cohort (Pick&Mix, ELTI and MIT90s) had cohort meetings, at which there was much informal collaboration (including, but not only, on Pathfinder bids) – thus even though there was no explicit competitor benchmarking there was much sharing of information, within a generally cooperative framework. In Phase 2, there was a greater strength of collaborative working.

There was also a requirement that anonymised carpets would be made public at some point after the programme. This perhaps had the effect of creating greater interest in comparative aspects – but always within the spirit of collaboration for development. (It may have helped that there was not even the minor competitive element of Pathfinder bids.) For example in the eMM final cohort meeting each institution presented their draft institutional carpet to cohort colleagues and in the Pick&Mix final cohort meeting each institution engaged in a frank self-reflection on their scores and the implications (even though there was not time to present all the scores in detail).

It is also worth noting that the former lack of comparative analysis in UK HE is not shared in other countries and sectors – it has been a part of eMM from the beginning that anonymised carpets are made public, for example in New Zealand, and in both English and Scottish FE their use has recently become routine – see for example work by Sero (2008).

Sadly, there was very little flow of information between the eMM and Pick&Mix methodologies at the institution level. However, this could be as much to do with the conceptual gap between eMM and the other public criterion-based methodologies, due to the use of dimensions in eMM – thus the gap is far wider than between Pick&Mix and its relatives – all of whom share a common MIT90s-inspired ancestor somewhere in the early part of the millennium – for history see Bacsich (2008b). A mitigating factor was that the author was, by design, a member of both teams – and there was considerable sharing of information via that route. It should also be noted that the types of universities involved in both cohorts were very different, and UK institutions are still not very good at collaborating across boundaries which are visible to them though often invisible to outsiders.

However, at a general level, and without much prompting from consultants, several items of vocabulary rapidly became common between eMM and Pick&Mix – particularly “carpet” and “slice”. With rather more direction, commonality was ensured in reporting format and “traffic-light” colouring for carpets – this was helped by a new BELA consultant with experience in benchmarking (e-maturity as they call it) in the non-university tertiary sector (Sero, 2008).

It remains little more than a dream that even the restricted range of methodologies used in recent times (eMM and Pick&Mix in particular) will eventually be able to draw on a common toolset of survey tools (as well as presentation and calculational tools mentioned above), and that there will be some kind of common conceptual framework for benchmarking e-learning.

Some attempts have been made on the framework aspects. In Phase 1, based on little more than a hope that the MIT90s framework could provide some kind of unifying influence, Pick&Mix adopted the MIT90s categories into its system, and more than one Pick&Mix institution used the MIT90s categories to structure its report. However, in Phase 2 the advent of anonymised carpets made it clear that the unmodified use of MIT90s is not possible for two reasons. First, the way that the Pick&Mix core criteria (not supplementaries) fall into MIT90s categories is extremely uneven. Second, pure MIT90s does not separate staff from students and has no category covering pedagogy, leading to accusations of it being “out of synch” with modern thinking in e-learning. As mentioned earlier, work is ongoing to see if these issues can be put right. MIT90s remains of interest as a change management tool.

Challenges and their resolution

A programme of this size, however good the Risk Register, will always throw up unexpected issues – and some expected ones that are known to be hard to resolve.

The question of what should be considered e-learning, what should not – and what should it be called – continued to exercise some staff in some institutions. The approach used to

relieve this stress was to suggest taking two different definitions and seeing how the criteria scores varied when using the standard and so-called “doppelganger” criteria. A more radical approach was to recommend benchmarking all of learning and teaching (the so-called Superslice in Pick&Mix terms). These “thought-experiments” seemed to concentrate minds – in the end no one really took either route. But suggestions of this nature helped engender some degree of consensus.

Phase 2 did not suffer from some of the challenges experienced in Phase 1 due to changes in senior staff in the time between submitting an expression of interest and actually joining the exercise – the reduced “latency” between bid and project start proved helpful. However, the consultants did draw on lessons from those earlier episodes and used where appropriate a tentative and facilitative initial approach and judicious use of two-consultant delegations.

There were a few institutions where unexpected staff losses (especially among senior staff), reorganisation and union issues caused challenges. In all cases the institutions coped themselves with these and stabilised their benchmarking teams – at times the tack from the consultants was “masterly inactivity” until the issues were resolved. This is evidence that benchmarking had a higher institutional profile in Phase 2 than in some in Phase 1.

Having learned from episodes in Phase 1, more care was taken to ensure that variant interpretations of methodologies did not arise. In eMM there is an ultimate methodology owner that the two working eMM consultants (one of whom is the paper author) could defer to for rulings when necessary – and the two consultants worked as buddies. In Pick&Mix the author took a clearer role as methodology owner (within the open source tradition), as part of a clearer division of duties between the four Pick&Mix consultants. The cohort meetings were also more carefully managed to ensure commonality of approach.

Phase 2 was spared the other challenge of Phase 1 which meant that proposals for participation in the Pathfinder Programme needed to be prepared while the benchmarking Phase 1 exercise was still far from complete.

Outcomes

This section focusses on reflection, collaboration, and documentation.

Reflection

A significant number of the Pick&Mix institutions, large and small, took the opportunity for their senior management to have a “reflection” meeting on the outcomes of the exercise. Such meetings took place in the period January-February 2008 – the support consultant was normally invited. Senior management teams reported to consultants that they found this a very positive part of the process. In addition, other Pick&Mix institutions used the very final scoring meeting for reflective purposes (usually there was an earlier rehearsal).

The eMM institutions tended to use their final carpet meetings in November/December for purposes of moderation and reflection, but the two Welsh institutions ran linked separate and joint reflection meetings in late January 2008.

Collaboration

The Open University and London External came into Phase Two with the express intention of working together – and in fact co-hosted a meeting in December 2008 in London on eMM for distance learning.

The two Welsh institutions are existing collaborators (including a joint reflection meeting) and further intra-Wales collaboration is taking place within the Gwella programme. The Welsh institutions made it clear that their collaboration is not restricted only to other Welsh institutions – collaboration beyond Wales is featured in the HEFCW e-learning strategy.

The WUN eMM institutions are continuing to work together in this area, and considering working with others in WUN including outside the UK – in particular Penn State, among its other merits a major DL player. Having said that, any vision of a global collaboration of DL institutions using eMM – or indeed any other benchmarking methodology – seems far away.

The Pick&Mix institutions (mainly but not all “new universities” in UK parlance) worked well and frankly with each other. Commonly held views in universities and consultants about newer institutions being “different” from more established institutions were not borne out in practice – the key differentiators in benchmarking seem to be much more to do with degree of decentralisation – which affects all kinds of institution – and size.

Documentation

The Pick&Mix and eMM methodologies are all documented in the public domain. All major updates to documentation are linked from the methodology entries on the HE Academy wiki and notified to enquirers via the HE Academy benchmarking blog.

The reports for eMM are stored in the eMM wiki maintained by Stephen Marshall at the University of Wellington in New Zealand (<http://www.utdc.vuw.ac.nz/emmWiki/index.php/>) or linked from that. There is also a blog which contains eMM news – and an eMM mailing list (more details of these at <http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/index.php/EMM>).

The reports and documentation for Pick&Mix are stored in the HE Academy benchmarking blog with commentary material on the HE Academy wiki. There is a backup archive of key material at the Matic Media web site (<http://www.matic-media.co.uk/benchmarking.htm>). Further updates to Pick&Mix are being currently done mainly in the context of the Gwella programme and will be notified primarily through the Gwella public blog.

The HE Academy wiki contains a growing variety of reference material:

- a page for each UK institution engaged in benchmarking, Pathfinder and/or Gwella
- a page for each of a number of countries and regions of relevance to the UK – including separate pages for each home nation of the UK
- a frequently updated Glossary of benchmarking terms
- links to a variety of other BELA-related outputs including an analysis of the HEFCE Measures of Success and HEFCW Indicators of Success
- an increasing range of material from the Research Observatory.

National indicators

It was not the main purpose of the benchmarking programme to produce an overview of the state of play of e-learning in the UK HE sector – the programme was set up with a strong ethos of developmental self-review not top-down audit. Nevertheless it was not surprising that as the programme successfully worked through its phases, more and more questions

were asked from Funding Councils. In England, the country where the majority of benchmarking was done, the Funding Council in their e-learning strategy document (HEFCE, 2005) formulated eight Measures of Success for the spread of e-learning in the sector. The Measures are very general and non-numeric – they are not Performance Indicators – and several apply most naturally to the sector overall, not to individual institutions.

It is in theory possible for any benchmarking methodology to report into the Measures of Success, provided this is planned in advance, provided the analytic effort is available and last but not least, provided that the institutions accept this. Technically it is much easier with some methodologies than with others. It was easy with Pick&Mix, not so easy with eMM. It is near-impossible with MIT90s due to the fact that institutions can and do each create individual criteria. For more background on these issues see the relevant wiki page (http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/index.php/Measures_of_Success).

In the pilot phase and Phase 1 the HEFCE Measures of Success appeared to have had little influence on the thinking of most institutions. However, in Phase 2 the requirement to produce an anonymised carpet of scores drew attention to the need for standard indicators. Consequently effort went into mapping both Pick&Mix and eMM into the HEFCE Measures. This work built on a number of sources including early work (in fact pre Phase 2) from Northumbria University (Bell and Farrier, 2008). In parallel, work was going on with mappings into MIT90s categories. Institutions were told in advance that this was going on and that it was likely that their scores against benchmarking criteria would eventually be made public – but in anonymous form.

Towards the end of Phase 2, it became clear that HEFCW were introducing Indicators of Success for e-learning. Thus work was also undertaken to map both methodologies into the HEFCW Indicators (http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/index.php/Indicators_of_Success).

In addition, it had already been agreed at an all-consultant meeting in summer 2007 that BELA would map its methodologies into the OBHE reporting categories, in order to allow at least a narrative overview of the sector to be constructed, if required. This also has the value of allowing some potential international comparisons. In order to complete the pattern of national indicators, the Becta Balanced Scorecard was included – which applies mainly to the non-university tertiary sector – but around 200 such institutions do deliver some HE (http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/index.php/Balanced_scorecard).

At the final Pick&Mix cohort meeting a draft final carpet was presented with all these derived indicators. A version of this has been published and a simplified version is on the next page.

The work for eMM was much more complex and it was felt to be unfruitful to complete it in all aspects. However at the final eMM cohort meeting, mappings were presented for HEFCE and HEFCW, the latter with the assistance of Bangor University. Given the very different nature of the eMM institutions and the small number in each sub-cohort it does not seem a feasible task to make such a carpet public in a way which preserves anonymity. It was different with Pick&Mix as there is far more similarity between the institutions.

The carpet for the Pick&Mix Phase 2 cohort is given in a table on the next page, for core criteria only. (If supplementary criteria are displayed, anonymity cannot be preserved.) The table uses a four-level traffic lights system which the author and co-workers are now using across a range of methodologies in the tertiary sector. Experience shows that most methodologies either use a 1-4 scale (especially those linked in some way with methodologies derived from quality procedures) or they use 1-5 or 1-6 scales that can be easily mapped into four levels. (Note that 1-3 scales are actively recommended against as giving inadequate discrimination.) The levels are coloured red (poor), amber (satisfactory), olive (adequate) and green (good).

To provide an overall picture of this part of the sector the average column has been included which gives the average numeric score on the usual Pick&Mix scoring levels of 1 through 6.

Table 1 The anonymised Pick&Mix carpet from Phase 2

#	Criterion name	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	Av
1	Adoption (phase, in Rogers sense)										3.6
2	VLE stage										5.1
3	Tools (beyond the core VLE set)										2.8
4	Usability (of the e-learning system)										2.5
5	Accessibility										2.0
6	e-Learning Strategy										3.9
7	Decisions on Projects (IT, e-learning)										3.4
8	Pedagogy										2.9
9	Learning Material										2.0
10	Training (staff development)										3.1
11	Academic Workload										1.6
12	Cost (analysis approaches)										1.4
13	Planning Annually										2.7
14	Evaluation (e-learning)										3.4
15	Organisation (of e-learning teams)										2.9
16	Technical Support to Staff										3.3
17	Quality Assurance (e-learning)										2.8
18	Staff Recognition and Reward										2.1
19	Decisions on Programmes										2.7
20	Quality Enhancement (e-learning)										3.5

Key	red	amber	olive	green

Although too much should not be read into this, it makes it clear that the following issues need more attention in the sector: accessibility and learning material style, academic workload and costs, and staff recognition and reward. This view fits with an earlier more narrative view from Phase 1 and is reasonably consistent with the view from OBHE (2007).

The selection of supplementary criteria and surrounding discussion of these also gave much information on institutional *non*-priorities. These indicate that there is as yet insufficient alignment between the strategy associated with e-learning and other institutional strategies (including estates and widening participation), too little emphasis on risk management for e-learning project and that Intellectual Property aspects of e-learning are not of key interest.

Ongoing work

Operationally, the main current focus of benchmarking for the author is leading the support for the four Gwella institutions in Wales using the new ELDDA version of Pick&Mix. Conceptual work is in progress in three areas:

- incorporation of new criteria to cover web 2.0, Libraries 2.0, employer engagement and multi-language provision – mainly for Gwella
- alignment of Pick&Mix benchmarking with the critical success factors literature – see for example Bacsich (2005) – in order to produce a version of Pick&Mix focussed on

benchmarking institutional suitability for “step-change” in e-learning – large-scale rapid change as defined by Becta (2008) – mainly but not only in the context of Re.ViCa

- use of Pick&Mix for benchmarking slices which are programme areas, allowing alignment with European “quality in e-learning” and JISC “curriculum redesign” agendas.

A note on Pick&Mix

Pick&Mix was based on a systematic review in 2005 (Bacsich, 2008b) of approaches to benchmarking e-learning, looking for commonalities of approach. One of the virtues of Pick&Mix (hence its name) is that it does not impose methodological restrictions and has incorporated (and will continue to incorporate) criteria from other methodologies of quality, best practice, adoption and benchmarking. It has the following key features:

- a set of criteria split into 20 core criteria (which each institution must consider) and supplementary criteria (from which each institution should select around five to consider)
- each criterion is scored on a level 1-5 scale with an additional level 6 to signify excellence: level 1 is always sector-minimum and level 5 is achievable sector best practice in any given time period
- use of criteria, couched in familiar terms and clearly correlated with success, coupled with familiar and lightweight project management, so as to lead to a “low footprint” style of benchmarking suitable for a range of institutions large and small, including departments and programmes within institutions as well as institution-wide approaches
- an “open content” method of distribution where each final release plus its supporting documents is available under a Creative Commons license.

Pick&Mix in Gwella

After discussion with the four institutions involved (each very different from the others) it was recommended to them in summer 2008 that they use only the Pick&Mix methodology. This was the only BELA methodology that had been used in every prior phase of benchmarking. It has been adapted to the Welsh situation and has a new name – ELDDA. In fact the adaptations needed for Wales have been folded back into the main system so that in reality Pick&Mix is going forward under the name ELDDA – thus avoiding a dangerous “forking” of the methodology base – as big a problem in benchmarking systems as it is in open source development. See <http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/index.php/ELDDA>.

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