



Higher Education Academy/JISC e-Learning Benchmarking Exercise

Phase 1: Overview Report (BELA)

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On behalf of the Higher Education Academy

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Preamble

This document provides an overview on the general aspects of the three methodologies used by the 17 institutions in Phase 1 of the benchmarking of e-learning exercise which were supported by the Benchmarking of e-Learning Associates (BELA) team. Because the methodologies will each have their own workbooks and other methods for dissemination of findings, it was felt that there was little need to go into detail on methodological matters in this overview report. Workbooks on the specific methodologies are in preparation and will be published in the near future.

Paul Bacsich, July 2007

BENCHMARKING OF E-LEARNING EXERCISE PHASE 1 OVERVIEW

Because the Benchmarking of e-Learning Exercise is still very much a work-in-progress the following report seeks only to offer readers an overview which summarises the main conclusions that BELA draws from the 17 institutions that they supported in Phase 1 of the exercise. It focuses on general methodological matters. More detailed reports, including summary conclusions as to the state of play of e-learning across the institutions, will become available as the programme nears its conclusion.

It should be noted also that this overview is *not* intended to be an evaluation of the 17 institutions in phase 1 of the exercise which were supported by BELA – the evaluation of Phase 1 is being carried out by the Academy's Evaluation and Dissemination Support Team (EDSuT). Consequently, the report is informed by close observation of the institutions rather than specific evaluation interviews. It will not speculate on motivations of institutions and their staff unless these motivations were communicated to the consultants.

The narrative is based on the documents and weblog postings created by the institutions during Phase 1, attendance at meetings (programme-level meetings, cohort workshops, meetings with individual institutions) and other informal contacts.

The report does draw on (without specific attribution) private draft reports of institutions, many of which were made available to the consultants.

The overview addresses the following areas:

1. Phase 1 from the BELA standpoint
2. An outline of key variances in processes from the pilot phase
3. A consideration of the methodology issues: synergies, commonalities and variances
4. The level and nature of support provided, with key activities, events, and resources
5. Key challenges, issues, and resolutions
6. Value added outcomes

1. Phase 1 from the BELA standpoint

- 1.1. There were 17 institutions supported by BELA in Phase 1. Of these, seven used Pick&Mix, six used ELTI, four used MIT90s and none used eMM (for further information see <http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/benchmarking/?p=164>)
- 1.2. All but one were English institutions; the other was a Welsh university. Of the English institutions, 12 were universities, two were specialist art institutions and two were mainstream FE institutions teaching some HE.
- 1.3. Each of the institutions successfully set up a benchmarking team, has followed one of the methodologies, has gathered data, and has produced benchmarking outcomes.
- 1.4. A few have produced public reports, and more are expected, for which we are grateful. Institutions have ownership of their benchmarking exercise and so any publication decision is under each participating institution's control.
- 1.5. All except one institution set up and ran a blog linked to the HE Academy benchmarking blog. All with blogs made some postings but the number and quality of postings were highly variable. Other communication technologies have also been employed including ad-hoc mail lists plus a specific group communication system which was used for ELTI.
- 1.6. The level of senior management involvement in the pilots has in many cases been high (in a few cases very high), and within the institutions the profile of the benchmarking activity has been high.
- 1.7. All Phase 1 institutions have valued being part of a national programme and having an external consultant.
- 1.8. Each group of institutions running a specific methodology joined in methodology cohort meetings held two to four times in Phase 1 (depending on methodology).
- 1.9. The one Welsh institution in the BELA cohorts did an excellent job and integrated well with English institutions.

2. Outline of the key variances in processes from the pilot phase

- 2.1. The model adopted – of an individual consultant working with each institution using a single benchmarking approach – was in Phase 1 again viewed positively by institutions. Several institutions have told BELA consultants on more than one occasion that the consultants have achieved a high level of credibility with institutions and have established good working relationships with them.
- 2.2. The bids for Phase 1 were submitted at the same time as the Pilot phase and so many were very out-of-date by the time the institutions joined the exercise; this issue is considered further in chapter 5.
- 2.3. Unlike the Pilot, in Phase 1 institutions supported by BELA were placed in methodology clusters thus gaining benefits from shared events and peer-support. The clusters worked well, in one case (MIT90s) very well.
- 2.4. Unlike the Pilot, in Phase 1, the minimum cluster size was four institutions and so there were no single-institution methodologies. This simplified matters including the reporting (it is impossible to report anonymously on one institution).

- 2.5. The HE Academy benchmarking wiki was employed more intensively than in the Pilot and some of the wiki postings were widely read. There was, however, no apparent interest from Phase 1 institutions in *contributing* to the wiki.
- 2.6. In Phase 1, bids for Pathfinder had to be finalised before information from the benchmarking exercise was complete. The Pathfinder preparation represented extra work for the institutions' benchmarking teams at a time of already high activity.
- 2.7. The "tone" of Phase 1 was much more operational than in the Pilot and so the emphasis on developing a scholarship of benchmarking e-learning was less pronounced than in the Pilot.

3. Methodology issues: synergies, commonalities and variances

- 3.1. Three benchmarking methodologies/tools were used across BELA Phase 1 institutions:
 - Pick&Mix used by 7 institutions – the method developed by Paul Bacsich initially for Manchester Business School and EU projects, and used by 3 institutions in the Pilot
 - ELTI (Embedding Learning Technologies Institutionally) used by 6 institutions – the audit tool produced by a JISC project and used by 3 institutions in the Pilot
 - MIT90s used by 4 institutions – a strategic framework for change management, not previously employed for benchmarking. This was used by only one institution in the Pilot and that only in a limited way – it had to be substantially reconceptualised for use in Phase 1, which thus in many ways was the real pilot of MIT90s.
- 3.2. While there are some high-level commonalities between the three methodologies used by BELA in Phase 1, there are almost no commonalities at a more detailed level – and even fewer between them and the OBHE methodology. Consequently, in order to offer the sector some choice of methodology the quid pro quo is that each methodology has required its own allotment of effort for ongoing support and documentation, with each methodology having a one-off support cost in addition to the cost of supporting institutions.
- 3.3. The support cost was lowest for Pick&Mix because the version used in Phase 1 was only a small update to that used in the pilot.
- 3.4. In contrast, much work was done at the start of Phase 1 by BELA to provide an intellectual underpinning to MIT90s and to reconceptualise MIT90s in terms of criteria formulation and group working, since the Pilot institution had not focussed on either of these. Then each institution had to do much work to create criteria from scratch – and since MIT90s is a flexible framework with no preset criteria, that effort is required each time it runs.
- 3.5. There had been widely different views from HEIs at the end of the Pilot as to the amount of updating that ELTI needed yet a common feeling that the ELTI documentation needed improvement. Consequently the HE Academy funded two BELA consultants to produce a composite update of ELTI and some additional guidance material – this was done during the course of Phase 1. The ELTI Phase 1 institutions drew on this revised version.

- 3.6. As in the Pilot, Phase 1 was not designed as a controlled trial of the methodologies. However, in the view of the teams using them, all three methodologies proved to be fit for purpose, although all required some tailoring to the individual circumstances of the HEIs using them.
- 3.7. MIT90s offers the most scope for tailoring and the four institutions took great advantage of this – in fact they came up with four very different sets of criteria, with different styles of narrative and different approaches to scoring (or not).
- 3.8. The new version of ELTI offers scope for tailoring by omitting indicators or creating new ones (no indicators in ELTI are now compulsory) and again institutions took advantage of this flexibility, some a great deal, others less.
- 3.9. As in the Pilot, there was a widely-expressed view to consultants that the precise nature of the methodology is much less important than the general process involved in asking penetrating questions about e-learning within an institution, particularly when it is an externally-driven process. Compared with the Pilot, more time was allotted by consultants to making institutions comfortable with their chosen methodology and embedding it in a change management context.
- 3.10. As in the Pilot, a few participants contended that most of the benchmarking tools contain implicit assumptions about good practice in e-learning. The MIT90s method makes fewer assumptions since it aims to capture current ideas about good practice within each *individual* HEI. Arguably, however, this comes with potential downsides, including a possibility of too much focus on comfortable issues, an unrehearsed feel to criteria wording and a lack of comparability.
- 3.11. Since ideas about good practice are constantly evolving (for example, reflecting the possibilities for pedagogy offered by Web 2.0 technologies), the methodologies themselves continued to be regarded as flexible frameworks, within which tools are constantly adapting and developing – within some constraints, of course. For example, several new Supplementary Criteria were added to Pick&Mix and many new indicators to ELTI, in both cases mostly generated by institutions in dialogue with the consultants.
- 3.12. In the Pilot there was a comparatively low level of interest in benchmarking against other institutions. In Phase 1, institutions in each BELA methodology cohort had group meetings, at which there was much informal collaboration including, but not only, on Pathfinder bids. Thus even though there was no explicit competitor research in BELA Phase 1 there was much sharing of information, within a generally cooperative framework.
- 3.13. In contrast, there was very little flow of information *between* methodologies. Despite encouragement from the consultants, institutions did not share any lower-level tools (especially surveys) across methodology cohorts.
- 3.14. However, two exceptions were that MIT90s institutions drew on or actually used some of the Pick&Mix criteria for their systems, and at the end of Phase 1, the Pick&Mix institutions seemed to welcome input from non Pick&Mix consultants.
- 3.15. At the end of the Pilot phase, there was some hope from consultants that the MIT90s framework could provide some kind of unifying influence. To this end, a small amount of work on MIT90s was funded under the Concordance Project. One outcome was that Pick&Mix adopted the MIT90s categories into its system, and

more than one Pick&Mix institution used the MIT90s categories to structure its report.

- 3.16. However, a number of developments inside and outside the sector weakened the position of MIT90s. In particular: neither OBHE nor ELTI has adopted the MIT90s categories; eMM retains its own approach to categories; the JISC ICT management and governance project did not use the MIT90s categories for its analysis of the issues; the Scottish college benchmarking programme was based on a version of eMM and so does not use MIT90s; and, finally, the new English college EMFFE benchmarking scheme does not use MIT90s categories (though the related MIT90s idea of transformation level remains in vestigial form, as it does in Pick&Mix and ELTI – but not eMM).

4. Level and nature of support provided, with key activities, events, and resources

- 4.1. As noted earlier, each BELA institution had a support consultant assigned to them. The support consultant made a number of visits to the institution, usually 4 to 6 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 would have a meeting with the PVC or other senior figure who had signed off the benchmarking expression of interest, in some cases more than one meeting. In a few cases (as with the pilot phase) the senior figure took an active part in the benchmarking team or its steering group.
- 4.2. In addition to the 1:1 meetings with the institutions, the support consultants for each methodology organised all-day cohort meetings where representatives (usually two) from each institution attended. Pick&Mix and ELTI had two such meetings, MIT90s had four. These meetings discussed topics of common interest, such as creating supplementary criteria or how to find evidence for criteria.
- 4.3. Each methodology was also supported by a range of documentation. The general principles of each methodology were described in entries on the HE Academy benchmarking wiki (<http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/>) with links to key files describing different aspects. From time to time, postings on the HE Academy benchmarking blog (<http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/benchmarking>) alerted institutions to new information, 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.
- 4.4. By agreement with the HE Academy, the ELTI cohort trialled another group communications system called OIM, which was piloted with ELTI and also used by the BELA consultants for their internal administration.
- 4.5. Some use was also made of audio conferencing for liaison with institutions and desktop video-conferencing for in-between cohort meetings, but the main conclusion was that such tools needed standardisation and “embedding” in order to be really useful.

4.6. A list of the main HE Academy, BELA and cohort meetings is below.

30 Aug 2006	Phase 1 briefing meeting	London
05 Sep 2006	Session at ALT-C 2006	Edinburgh
10 Oct 2006	Phase 1 start-up meeting	Manchester
10 Nov 2006	MIT90s cohort meeting #1	University of Glamorgan
11-12 Dec 2006	BELA and BELA-EDSuT meetings	London
16 Jan 2007	Pick&Mix cohort meeting #1	University of Derby
16 Jan 2007	ELTI cohort meeting #1	Nottingham Trent University
18 Jan 2007	MIT90s cohort meeting #2	Thames Valley University
16 Feb 2007	MIT90s cohort meeting #3	University of Bradford
13 Mar 2007	ELTI cohort meeting #2	Manchester Metropolitan University
26 Mar 2007	Pick&Mix cohort meeting #2	HE Academy, York
30 Mar 2007	MIT90s cohort meeting #4	University of Brighton
02-03 Apr 2007	BELA and BELA-EDSUT meetings	HEFCE, London
19 Apr 2007	"Taking Stock" event	Nottingham
20 April 1997	Evaluation meeting	London

5. Key challenges, issues, resolutions

- 5.1. Because the BELA team members were supporting multiple methodologies for Phase 1, the time available during the start-up meeting for initiating each methodology proved insufficient and so required supplementary activity on the part of the consultants following the meeting to address the needs of the institutions. The experience informed our decision to introduce methodology-specific briefing sessions on the day after the start-up meeting in Phase 2 of the benchmarking exercise.
- 5.2. As with the Pilot, the question of what should be considered e-learning (and what should not) continued to exercise some Phase 1 institutions. The consultants tended to deal with this by suggesting taking two different definitions and seeing how the criteria scores varied – and if necessary benchmarking all of learning and teaching (the so-called Superslice in Pick&Mix terms). On the whole, suggestions of this nature helped engender some degree of consensus. A similar approach is being taken in Phase 2.
- 5.3. In some institutions who had originally submitted their expression of interest for phase 1 in early 2006, one or more senior staff and several benchmarking team staff had left in the interim. For such institutions (and some others) the typical approach was to use a more tentative and facilitative initial approach, focussing first on the overall justification for the benchmarking (usually in terms of institutional improvement) – and on the whole this approach was productive.
- 5.4. There were a very few institutions where serious and unexpected staff losses caused major disruption to the benchmarking and/or its reporting. In such cases the consultants tried not to make demands that were unreasonable in the changed circumstances. This issue does seem to be more of a problem in smaller FE institutions and those under external pressures unrelated to the benchmarking exercise. (In larger ones the consultants have in a few cases recommended additional support from non-benchmarking consultants.)

- 5.5. In some cases there was an evolution of variant interpretations of a methodology by different consultants in the BELA team. The cohort meetings, however, provided an opportunity to ameliorate this tendency by ensuring a commonality of approach. In addition, a more team-based approach to consultant support was piloted with the MIT90s cohort. (This is the basis of the “buddy” consultant support model now being used across Phase 2.)
- 5.6. For logistical reasons there was an attempt to split the large Pick&Mix cohort into “north” and “south” subgroups each with their own support consultant. Under a number of pressures, including a wish from the two specialist art institutions to work together, this geographic approach proved unsustainable and so the groups merged back into the one cohort, with we believe no deleterious outcome. (In Phase 2 the cohorts will not be split but the buddy model will help to facilitate these larger groups.)
- 5.7. The exigencies of the 2006-2008 Benchmarking and Pathfinder Programme meant that proposals for participation in Pathfinder phase 1 needed to be prepared while the benchmarking Phase 1 exercise was still underway; this proved challenging for the institutions. In order to reduce the pressure somewhat, the consultants were prepared to reschedule meetings and encouraged institutions to have a separate Pathfinder bid person not so committed to the work of the benchmarking team. The issue will not recur in Phase 2 as Pathfinder funding is not available to institutions in this phase.
- 5.8. There were some tensions in several institutions between “benchmarking” and “quality” stakeholders. Each was resolved at a tactical level but there is perhaps work to do, at both local and Academy level, to develop the synergies of the constituencies.
- 5.9. The HEFCE Measures of Success appeared to have little influence on the thinking of the benchmarking institutions. Addressing this issue was, however, felt to be outside the scope of what could be achieved in Phase 1 because no active benchmarking methodology refers explicitly to the Measures of Success. The issue has, however, been addressed in Phase 2 due to a change in reporting requirements.

6. Value added outcomes

- 6.1. This chapter covers institutions who have published their own benchmarking reports, ongoing institutional collaborations, dissemination activities and outputs from cohort meetings.
- 6.2. Several institutions have published public final reports linked to their blog. These include the University of Brighton, University of East London, University of Sunderland and University of Teesside. Some other institutions including Bradford College have published summary reports. The easiest way to access the Phase 1 institution blogs is via the menu section of the Academy benchmarking blog. Public final reports still are expected from many of the BELA institutions including all the MIT90s institutions but other pressures appear to have delayed their publication.
- 6.3. Several existing institutional collaborations are continuing – and facilitated by the HE Academy. In particular the four MIT90s institutions expressed a wish to continue to work together. Thus the three English MIT90s institutions have been placed in the same Pathfinder consortium “Amoeba” and joined by the Welsh MIT90s institution – a very successful Amoeba/MIT90s meeting was held in late June 2007.
- 6.4. The HE Academy has also facilitated ongoing collaboration by appointing the two BELA senior consultants to be “Critical Friends” each to a Pathfinder cluster of four institutions, one of which is Amoeba and the other includes BELA Phase 1 institutions.
- 6.5. Institutions – and the staff within them – are also undertaking their own dissemination activities. Inevitably, because Phase 1 has only just finished, there are few outputs as yet. However, there will be institutional involvement in the benchmarking symposium at ALT-C. One of the BELA consultants is also contributing a benchmarking-related paper to ALT-C, and several research papers are in early stages of planning by staff at institutions. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that many of the research outputs will not appear until Phase 2 of the exercise is complete.
- 6.6. The BELA methodologies are all documented and in the public domain. All major updates to documentation are linked from the methodology entries on the HE Academy benchmarking wiki and notified to enquirers via the HE Academy benchmarking blog. In certain cases additional “work in progress” material is available in HELGA (the new private social networking option for Phase 2 institutions) and, in the case of ELTI, in the OIM.
- 6.7. In addition to the major outputs, other more specific outputs have been made available by BELA institutions and consultants. The Academy wiki contains a frequently updated glossary of benchmarking terms and links to a variety of other BELA-related outputs including an analysis of the HEFCE Measures of Success. Institutional blogs contain several analyses useful beyond the host institution.