

Benchmarking for technology enhanced learning: Longer term benefits

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It is one thing to undertake Benchmarking in the areas of technology enhanced learning (TEL) as a one-off activity, but it is quite another to build this form of activity into your strategy for future and long-term growth at an institution. This paper reports on a follow-up study conducted in 2015 with 22 of the 24 institutions who first participated in major inter-institutional benchmarking activity in June 2014, using the ACODE Benchmarks. The study was conducted eight months after the initial activity to understand how the institutions that had participated in the initial activity had used this to build their capacity for future growth. It will provide evidence of the longer-term value of this type of activity and will conclude with a series of recommendations on how an institution may apply this methodology to enhance its capacity to deal with the rapidly changing TEL space.

Keywords: Benchmarking, technology enhanced learning, quality indicators, improvement.

Introduction

In June 2014 the Australasian Council of Online, Distance and eLearning (ACODE) facilitated a major Benchmarking Summit at Macquarie University in Sydney using the then recently reformatted ACODE Benchmarks for Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL). This was, without doubt, an unprecedented event within the Australasian higher education sector, with 24 institutions from five different countries coming together to Benchmark their capacity in this area of TEL. There were 15 Australian institutions, six from New Zealand, along with one each from the UK, South Africa and Fiji, present at the Benchmarking Summit. A paper describing this event in more detail, along with the finding of a major evaluation survey was presented as part of the 2014 ascilite conference proceedings (Sankey, 2014a).

One of the reasons this event was so well attended is because benchmarking in the areas of TEL is becoming an increasingly important part of how many institutions are able to mediate a level of quality in their practices and then align this with the practice of other institutions. A further driver for this is that many of the issues being faced by Australasian universities, particularly in the area of quality in the online space, are coming under increased scrutiny. This is highlighted by Freeman (2014), who writes:

Few university policy cycles include the value-adding stages of monitoring, evaluation and benchmarking. This suggests that many Australian universities [and by implication New Zealand universities] will face challenges meeting the Australian tertiary sector regulators' requirements regarding evidence of implementation of policy, and improvement of policy over time. (P. 84)

The purpose of the ACODE benchmarks for TEL (of which there are eight) has been to support the continuous quality improvement of many of the institutional practices around technology enhanced learning (ACODE, 2014). The approach adopted by this ACODE Benchmarking tool reflects an enterprise perspective, integrating the key issue of pedagogy with institutional dimensions, such as planning, staff development and infrastructure provision. These benchmarks have been developed for use at either an enterprise level, or by an organisational unit, and may also be used for self-assessment, or as part of a broader collaborative benchmarking activity.

To participate in the Benchmarking Summit, held in June 2014, each institution had to first undertake a rigorous self-assess of their capacity in TEL against the embedded performance indicators (PIs) that are part of (used to validate) the Benchmarks. They then had to be willing to share that self-assessment with all the other institutions involved. As part of their commitment, each institution had to

participate in a minimum of two of the benchmarks, with some institutions doing three, four or five, and one institution doing all eight. During the summit, each institution took it in turns to briefly describe how they came to give themselves their particular rating. This, in many cases, generated quite lively discussion and debate as to why an institution gave themselves a particular rating and what would be considered good/best practice. But more importantly, thanks to this debate and the open sharing of practice, each institution was then able to make a judgement on the veracity of their self-assessment. Here lies the essence of the Benchmarking activity; having the opportunity to engage in broad ranging discussion around the PIs allows participants to form clear judgements as to the context of their own institutions practice, thereby allowing them to make qualitative determinations as to the accuracy of their self-assessment.

Ultimately, the following two comments, in particular, exemplified the overall sentiment expressed by the participants of the Summit held in June 2014:

“Great opportunity to meet and share where everyone is at. The benchmarking exercise is a great self reflective practice that is reinforced through the feedback and deliberation from other institutions”

“I really enjoyed this Benchmarking Summit, I have learned a lot from the inter-institutional activity and will definitely be sharing and pushing for these benchmarks to be accepted at our institution. Thank you for facilitating this and look forward to the institution following up with the benchmarks in the future.”

However, as with many activities of this nature, once it is all over people are inclined to go back to their day jobs and tend not to think too much about things like Benchmarking until it becomes time to do it all again. It was therefore seen as important to try and gauge a clear understanding of the longer-term benefits gained both individually and corporately by participating in, firstly undertaking the internal benchmarking activity and secondly attending the Benchmarking Summit. As a consequence, in March of 2015 a follow-up survey was provided to all those who attended the Summit to ascertain the level of follow-up activity that may have been generated by undertaking the benchmarking activity and participating in the Summit, once they had returned to their institutions.

How this worked

The twenty five participants responding to this survey, representing 22 institutions, had all previously undertaken the post-summit evaluation survey conducted in July 2014 and were all familiar with the approach being taken with the current online survey. The representatives from two institutions did not participate as the staff were no-longer at these institutions. The earlier survey had consisted of 30 questions, however, this current survey consisted of only seven questions, along with some basic demographic data to allow for the alignment with the previous collected data.

Based on the fact that all the respondents had participated in the benchmarking activity eight months prior, each respondent was asked to:

- reflect on their experience and on how useful, or otherwise, they felt it had been for both them personally and to their institution,
- describe what they had formally done within your institution since the activity. e.g., had they written any formal reports to management? If so how were they received? Or was their participation in the event used more for internal purposes only?
- describe how useful the follow-up documentation had been (the formal ACOE report on the benchmarking activity containing their data aligned with the data from the other institution involved), even though the data in the document had been anonymised.
- comment on the proposition that ACOE would now formally facilitate a benchmarking activity every two years.
- comment on how useful it would be for them to have access to an online tool to assist them in the collection and reporting of their institutional data.
- comment on whether the data collected by that tool should be shareable with other participating institutions, and
- lastly, although most of them only did some of the benchmarks, how useful was it to sit-in on all the discussions (which was the case), or should future events be broken-up into smaller

groups to try and streamline the activity, or was there more value to them in hearing what other institutions were doing across the other areas?

Findings

Eight months on and there was still a significantly positive affirmation of the usefulness of the benchmarking activity from both a personal and institutional perspective. All 22 institutions had, to some degree, continued their affiliation with the Benchmarks, using them as a way of base-lining their ongoing TEL activities, or by providing them a solid platform to advocate from. In some cases there had also been follow-up activities within their institutions, while others stated that they would be returning to using the benchmarks again in the near future. About one third of the participants found that this activity served as a confirmatory activity, particularly in support of their current direction, while the other two thirds found that they had found them useful for providing evidence to their institution with a view to promote further growth.

Importantly, it was not just the Benchmarking activity that was seen as helpful, but the activities that each institution had to undertake to prepare for this activity, and then to align this with their ongoing strategic approach. To highlight this two institutions commented:

“Many of our colleagues from across the campus who engaged with the workshop activity to set our initial scores were very positive and appreciative saying it was the best reflective engagement activity on their practice they had ever undertaken. We will use the ACODE data as a baseline measure of some of the benefits of our current refocus/restructure” (413).

“The strategic framework sitting under the benchmarks also gave me an idea of what it would look like if we as an institution were to adopt an integrated, strategic approach to the support of TEL” (418).

When asked how the information had been fed back to the senior university management only in five of 22 instances had formal reports been written and presented to their senior management, although many had actively brought this to the attention of their senior managers. Far more common was the use of their findings for internal reporting and for informing their future practice, at a practical and strategic unit/department level. Not surprisingly, some institutions were undergoing some form of restructure, so the value was more localised, at the unit/department level. Indicative of the comments provided by participants:

“I have fed back the comparative reports to the individuals who participated in the benchmarking process with me, and that was of interest to them, although I haven't followed up with whether they have taken it any further. I did provide a verbal and summarised report for my manager, although mostly this was for internal purposes” (5118).

To help assist institutions in their reporting, ACODE authored a formal report on the Benchmarking activity (Sankey, 2014b). This report provided institutions with a thorough description of the activity, nominated which institutions undertook which benchmarks and provided anonymised data from the institutions. When asked how useful this report was, the vast majority participants found this to be very helpful and were not overly concerned by the fact that the data had been anonymised. The following is indicative of this sentiment being expressed by the respondents:

“It has been helpful because most of the time it is affirming to know that we are not the only ones who are struggling with some aspect or other. At other times, it is clear that we are outliers. It is always useful to get a sense of where one sits in comparison with others. The documentation has got us into good solid discussions at times” (6115).

When it was proposed that future benchmarking activities will be facilitated on a bi-yearly basis by ACODE, all the participants believed this was an excellent idea. More importantly, the proposed addition of an online tool to help them gather and collate their benchmarking data was overwhelmingly supported (95% agreement). However, in agreeing to this each institution was also very cautious about making their findings too transparent. Comments such as this exemplify the sentiment being

expressed:

“It is important that we share our ideas and findings with others as long our anonymity as an institution is upheld” (7122).

“An online tool for collecting and reporting data would be invaluable. I don't see why it shouldn't be shareable with other participating organisations, provided the same confidentiality conditions apply as with the 2014 summit” (7126).

In the 2014 Benchmarking Summit all the institutions involved sat in on the discussions around all the benchmarks, regardless if they had done all eight or just two. In the initial evaluation some participants (those who had not undertaken many) suggested that this was too much, proposing alternative models of conducting the event, or lengthening the event (to 3 days) to allow for more discussions. It was therefore important to understand, prior to organising the 2016 event, if there had been a change in the participant's sentiments, particularly since they had now had more chance to reflect.

On this occasion 77% of participants agreed that it was more helpful to sit in on all the sessions, 15% stated they would prefer more focused sessions, sessions focusing only on the benchmarks they participated in, while the remaining 8% made alternate suggestions. This positive sentiment was backed-up by comments such as the following:

“The four we didn't do we got more learning from sitting in on those, as opposed to the four we had done as we already knew what we knew. But it would depend on how many were going to be there. It was definitely good to go to all of them” (812).

“In our case, this proved to be even more valuable than sitting in on the benchmarks we had selected since we gained many new insights in a very short space of time” (812).

Overall, the feedback received has provided ACODE with a clear way forward. Not only had the institutions benefited from the Benchmarking activity (self-assessment and participating in the Summit), but they had also incorporated much of their learnings into creating a positive outcome for their institution.

Conclusion

Many of the issues we face in our institutions can be remediated by simply taking the time to self-assess against a set of quality indicators, like those found in the ACODE Benchmarks for TEL. However, when we then look to further extend that self-reflection, by sharing our current practice with those in similar circumstances, this provides the impetus for a truly dynamic learning activity. This study has confirmed that there are both short term and longer term benefits to undertaking a holistic benchmarking activity around the fast changing field of technology enhanced learning. This will become increasingly important as our regulatory bodies start to develop their formal measures for ensuring institutions are meeting their obligations to their students in relation to technology enhanced learning. An activity, like the Inter-institutional Benchmarking Summit that was facilitated by ACODE in June 2014, has provided the opportunity for many of the institutions involved to build relationships and stronger ties with their colleagues. In the broader context it has also provided these institutions with some of the wherewithal to meet the unique challenges of building a strong digital future. The ACODE Benchmarks for TEL have provided a catalyst to help make this happen for those who will take the time and subsequently benefited from the experience.

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