

Evaluating benchmarking as a methodology for the enhancement of quality in academic libraries

Nuria Balagué¹ and Jarmo Saarti²

¹ Deputy Director, Library Service, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra, BARCELONA, SPAIN

² Library Director, PhD, University of Eastern Finland Library, P.O. Box 1627, FI-70211 KUOPIO, FINLAND.

Abstract: Benchmarking can be defined as a methodology where business processes, performance metrics and best practices are compared. Usually, the comparison is done between two organizations, but one can also choose different settings for comparison, e.g. when benchmarking is performed statistically, the number of organizations compared can be much larger– for example, all the libraries in one country or even in the world. The main function of benchmarking is to enhance one’s own practices and processes; if one can achieve a win-win situation, this is usually the most motivating kind of approach. We have been practicing benchmarking between the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Library (Spain) and the University of Eastern Finland Library (Finland) for about ten years. The aim of our paper and presentation will be 1. To take a critical look at benchmarking as a process in quality enhancement, 2. To summarize the findings emerging from our benchmarking project and 3. To devise a model sheet for the most fruitful approach to benchmarking between academic libraries. The results also reveal the best practices of benchmarking in these institutions; recommendations are given to the further development of the library benchmarking and co-operation between libraries.

Keywords: academic libraries, quality management, benchmarking, service development, best practices

1. Introduction

During the past 20 years, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has created a solid international collaboration on higher education and a common set of commitments, structural reforms and shared tools have been implemented in support of the development of a quality culture; here the role of libraries and other academic support services are of particular importance. The EHEA context allows more facilities for cooperation, but there is also an increase in competition between universities and the services that they provide.



Libraries need to have mechanisms for the measurement and evaluation of their activities to guarantee the quality of the services offered to the university community. As a result, one of the main challenges of libraries is to investigate and to decide on the most appropriate mechanisms with which to improve and ensure the quality of their output.

Although the processes and activities performed in university libraries can be similar from one library to the next, each organization is different and can be implementing activities that are performed in different ways. It also seems that libraries are currently attempting to strike a balance between strictly ruled library processes towards a more open and creative way of co-operative service planning and provision (Saarti 2018).

There has been an on-going benchmarking project between the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Library (Spain) and the University of Eastern Finland Library (Finland) for about ten years. These benchmarking activities in selected libraries have proved to be a fruitful way to manage everyday challenges in both libraries, develop quality management and strategic management processes and in addition have increased co-operation between these institutions.

The aim of this paper is to take a critical look at benchmarking as a process in quality enhancement, to summarize the findings emerging from these benchmarking projects and to produce some ideas for the most fruitful approach to benchmarking between academic libraries.

2. Benchmarking as a process in quality enhancement

Benchmarking can be defined as a methodology where the business processes, performance metrics and best practices are compared. Usually, the comparison is done between two organizations, but one can also choose different settings for comparison. If the benchmarking is done statistically, the number of organizations compared can be larger– for example, all the libraries in one country or even in the world. Benchmarking started from the private sector to enhance the productivity and quality of the production processes, but it has also been used within the public sector (Löffler 2001, 28 - 29).

The main function of benchmarking is to enhance one's own practices and processes and to achieve a win-win situation since this is the most motivating kind of approach. For example, one must create a trusted environment for discussions to allow sharing and developing of the ideas of all the involved parties. Benchmarking is always a learning process and the motivation behind it is to find the so-called best practices from colleagues that have managed to develop their services in such a way that can be used as an example for the development of others. Thus, benchmarking is a communication tool (Buset et al., 2019) to learn from other organizations in how to implement the best practices found during the process and to avoid the pitfalls other organizations have experienced (Balagué et al. 2014).

In the mid-1990s, Kinnell & Garrod (1995) suggested that benchmarking would be a quality tool which should form part of an overall quality program aimed at improving services in libraries. Librarians have a long tradition of networking and of informal networking. As professionals, we have plenty of opportunities to meet colleagues from other libraries (meetings, congresses, workshops etc.). There are also many opportunities to visit other libraries, in your own country or abroad (e.g. Erasmus week). Thus, libraries and librarians are well able to conduct benchmarking.

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative research based on the results of a continuous benchmarking activity between two university libraries, the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona Library (Spain) and the University of Eastern Finland Library (Finland), which has lasted for about ten years. Both authors have been involved in this process so they have gained insightful knowledge during this time, but one must bear in mind that the findings are nonetheless subjective and should be viewed in a critical manner.

Year	Benchmarked Subject	Paper Type	Methodology	Approach
2009	Quality Systems	Case study	Qualitative research	comparative analysis
2014	Quality Audits	Case study	Qualitative research	comparative analysis
2016	Knowledge Management Practices	Case study	Qualitative research	comparative analysis
2018	Information Literacy and Numeracy Practices and Communication Tools	Case study	Qualitative research	comparative analysis based on interviews
2019	Risk Management Approaches	Case study	Qualitative research	comparative analysis

Table 1. List of the benchmarking subprojects

Table 1. provides a list of these benchmarking subprojects at least one published paper has been produced from each phase. In the following section, we will perform a comparative textual analysis based on these papers where the aim is to identify structures and best practices in these subprojects. As a result, a

summary will be presented on the benchmarking tools and findings of the adequacy of the benchmarking in the library quality management analysis between the selected libraries.

4. Benchmarking projects and their findings

So far, these benchmarking projects have been divided into five subprojects. Reports have been published focused on each phase. Both authors already had a long history on building and maintaining a quality management system and that has been exploited in this benchmarking form of co-operation.

The benchmarking is used widely in the quality management work, and the demand for continuous improvement in the quality management requires these kinds of tools for defining the best practices, e.g. to compare one's own work with others as a way of finding out where and how one can improve service processes. The quality management consists of different types of evaluation tools that can also be interpreted as a way of conducting benchmarking, e.g. internal and especially external audits, self-evaluation, and the indicator-based approach to process monitoring and development.

The basis for fruitful benchmarking is to define what one wants to benchmark. Here one can see two approaches: complete system or institution level benchmarking and process or some specific area benchmarking. In this co-operation, both approaches have been used.

If one wishes to discuss (benchmark) those aspects that are important for the libraries involved, initially one needs to know and to understand the structures and the specific organizational cultures in each organization, and to be able to identify those organizational issues that are different from one's own library and appreciate why they are different. This is especially important when conducting international comparisons where cultural aspects must be taken into account in order to be able to see behind these factors and to be able to benchmark processes not just the behavioural patterns of the people involved.

This benchmarking started from the comparison of the quality systems implemented in both libraries (Balagué & Saarti 2009). Both libraries had a history of using an ISO 9001 based quality system. The systematic approach to the building of the quality system was not widespread in academic libraries and thus both needed a benchmarking partnership with whom to exchange ideas and experiences on the ISO 9001 based quality system. This first project led also to a second project where the authors wrote two books about quality management and libraries.

The second project involved another author who was also interested in building quality management systems. In that project (Balagué, Düren, Juntunen & Saarti 2014), the quality auditing in three European countries was compared: Finland, Germany, and Spain. By then, both internal and external auditing had become

an important tool in quality assurance in the European higher education area (EHEA) as a tool for maintaining excellence in higher education in the European Union (ENQA 2015).

After these more quality management system-oriented projects, the project aim changed to a more workforce-oriented approach. The third project was about the knowledge management practices in selected academic libraries (Balagué, Düren & Saarti 2016). This theme was chosen because at present, quality assurance is built both on information systems and on an educated workforce. The fourth project (Balagué & Saarti 2018) was concerned with workplace information literacy, numeracy, and communication practices.

The fifth sub-project (Balagué & Saarti 2019) involved a return to a more system-oriented approach and the subject was also changed to a non-library specific point-of-view, i.e. the benchmarking of the risk management systems.

4.1. Focusing and scopes

In Figure 1, a process model of benchmarking is presented. Based on experiences in these sub-projects, it seems that a general level benchmarking is a good starting point, especially if the partners do not have any knowledge about each other beforehand.

Usually, this kind of benchmarking is built on some type of a structured system approach, in our case on the ISO 9001 based quality system. This eases the comparisons to be made because the partners have a common vocabulary and structure for their discussions and benchmarking comparisons. Thus, it was found (Balagué & Saarti 2009):

“The ISO 9001:2000 guides institutions so that they will develop their quality management systems along similar lines. Both libraries have come up with the same kinds of solutions to the key points of the standard and it has helped them to develop their services and analyse how they have succeeded in this task.”

The general level benchmarking helps the organizations to enhance their quality management approaches and gives ideas for a more specific level best practice implementation. This usually leads to the process and product level benchmarking.

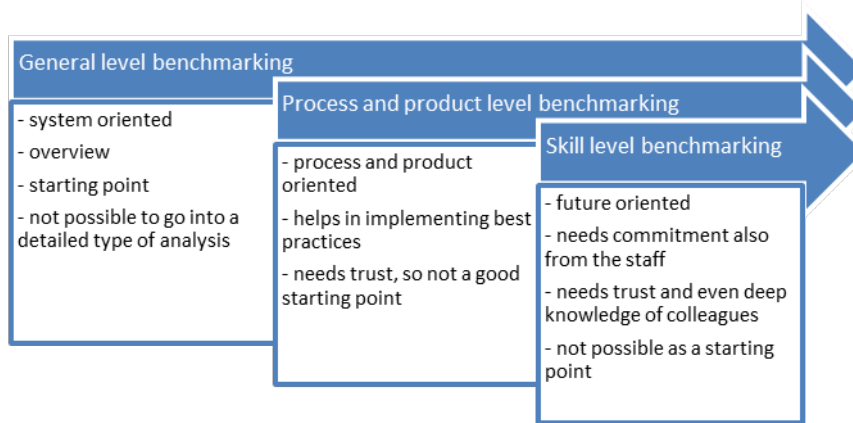


Fig. 1. Levels of benchmarking

In the audit benchmarking project, there was a more in-depth evaluation of the auditing processes in the selected libraries. Thus, the libraries were able to evaluate different types – i.e. internal and external – of audits and how these were conducted in different organizations. This comparison led to the conclusion that (Balagué, Düren, Juntunen & Saarti 2014): “The audit discussions and quality management system also provide a possibility to change the discussion in the libraries from personal matters towards the library’s basic services and products and how these can be tailored to meet the needs of the library’s users”.

The next phase was more skills and knowledge oriented and involved an in-depth analysis of the staff and their co-operation (Balagué, Düren & Saarti 2016 and Balagué & Saarti 2018). It was noted that this type of benchmarking is more future-oriented and demands trust and deeper knowledge of the partners involved and about their organizational cultures.

In the latter article (Balagué & Saarti 2018), it was stated that: “The workplace information systems and their valid implementation to active use can help in the organization’s strategy work. It also enhances the quality of the library’s service processes.” This means that this more in-depth analysis also involves the total systematic approach but gives greater insights into what is happening in the libraries and how their staff conduct their daily work.

4.2. Involvement and human interaction

A well-conducted benchmarking is a communicative process that needs management and planning and has different types of possible approaches. Figure 2 depicts the main approaches used during these projects.

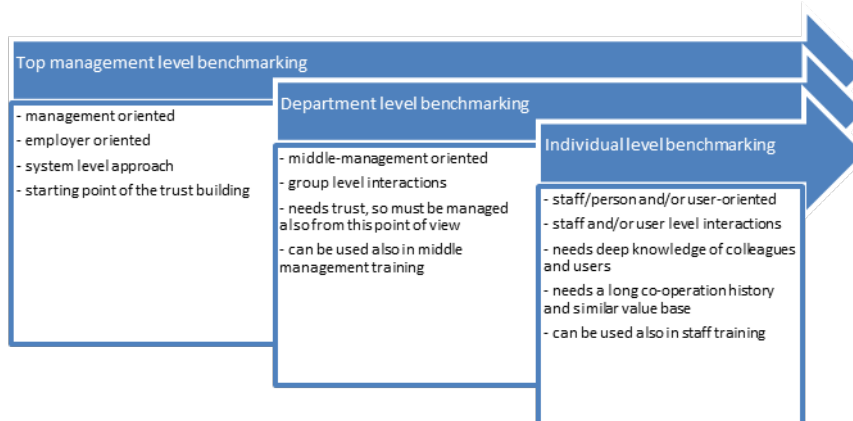


Fig. 2. Levels of trust building and human interaction

The top management level approach works well if the library wants to examine its processes and documentation from the management and employee point of view. This approach is quite often used at the beginning of benchmarking because it involves rather few people and enables organizational level trust building. Widening this approach to the middle-management level is quite easy because usually the top management level approach involves the involvement of middle-management.

The individual level benchmarking is most challenging but at the same time, the most fruitful. It enables an analysis of different opinions and points-of-views. In addition, if it is possible to interact also with users, this might open totally new interpretations of the library and its processes.

The individual level benchmarking needs to be based on detailed planning; fortunately, modern digital communication tools provide new possibilities. This kind of benchmarking can even be used in the training of staff, especially in the best practice approach and can even lead to developmental projects between the partners involved.

4.3. Tools for service enhancement - a model sheet for benchmarking between academic libraries

The main aim of benchmarking must be the improvement of the services. Thus, the systematic approach in implementing benchmarking is important. When undertaking the general type of top-management oriented benchmarking, based on our experiences in these projects, the use of a general common framework seems to be fruitful. Here the ISO 9001 standard was used. This provided a

detailed framework also for a more in-depth analysis of processes and their quality management.

This is the case also in the more detailed and focused process type of benchmarking. Naturally, the common cultural environment, i.e. higher education and the framework built in creating the European higher education area, was helpful in these projects. The fact that the librarianship faces the same typical challenges and provides similar services in the academic environment increased the awareness of the academic librarianship in the libraries involved and at the same time helped in searching for the best practices to be implemented.

The best practices approach is the most motivating aspect of benchmarking. In these projects, the aim has always been to create something concrete, e.g. a factsheet or check-list type of outcome to be utilized not only for the libraries involved but even for a larger audience. This approach is, of course, the ultimate motivation to encourage staff involvement; benchmarking helps in the development and optimization of the services provided.



Fig. 3. Benchmarking process cycle

One should prepare a checklist for a profitable benchmark university library visit e.g. as follows (see also Fig.3.):

1. Define the focus or problem – use examples and cases.
2. Gather the basic data of the (possible) partner(s) and undertake the basic comparison and partner finding based on these findings.
3. Learn how the process is done in the other library.

4. Plan together the intervention and try to facilitate the meetings of the key people beforehand.
5. Perform the benchmarking visit and be prepared to ask questions – prepare a list of questions. Do remember to answer questions not just ask them.
6. Jointly prepare the best practice report.
7. Implement the ideas.
8. Plan the next visit and focus – if needed, evaluate the selected partners/select new ones.

5. Concluding remarks

The key factor in a fruitful benchmarking is good planning according to the planning cycle presented in the previous chapter. Based on experiences in the projects conducted, it seems that the cyclic nature of benchmarking enhances the results, i.e. a long co-operation between the partners involved builds trust and enables a more in-depth development of services.

Benchmarking, when properly conducted, gives new ways of improving the services and it also provides a different point of view to the library and its functions. It also increases the collegial network and builds trust between the partners. Ultimately, it enhances the best-practise type of innovation management for strategic management in all the participating libraries.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Dr Ewen MacDonald for linguistic advice.

References

- Balagué Núria, Saarti Jarmo (2009). Benchmarking quality systems in two European academic libraries. *Library Management* 30(4/5): 227-239.
- Balagué Núria, Düren Petra, Juntunen Arja, Saarti Jarmo (2014). Quality Audits as a Tool for Quality Improvement in Selected European Higher Education Libraries. *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40(5): 529-533.
- Balagué Núria, Düren Petra, Saarti Jarmo (2016). Comparing the knowledge management practices in selected European higher education libraries. *Library Management* 37(4/5): 182-194. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/LM-12-2015-0068>
- Balagué Núria, Saarti Jarmo (2018). Enhancing the Quality of the Library Processes – Benchmarking Workplace Information Literacy, Numeracy and Communication Practices in Two European University Libraries. In: *Information Literacy in the Workplace*. Ed. by Serap Kurbanoglu et al. *Communications in Computer and Information Science* (810):40 - 49. Cham, Springer.
- Balagué, N., Saarti, J. (2019) Comparing the Risk Management Approaches at two European Academic Libraries. *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries. QQML 2019*. Fiesole (Italy), 28-31 May 2019.
- Buset, Karen Johanne, Declève, Ghislaine & Ovaska, Tuulevi. (2019). Hunting for the library value: benchmarking as a communication tool. *Journal of the European association for health information and libraries*, 15 (1): 8-14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.32384/jeahl15305>

- ENQA (2015). Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium. https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf
- Kinnell, Margaret; Garrod, Penny (1995) Benchmarking and Its Relevance to the Library and Information Sector. 1st Northumbria International Conference on Performance Measurement in Libraries and Information Services. ERIC Number: ED405875. Available at <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED405875>
- Löffler, Elke (2001). Quality awards as a public sector benchmarking concept in OECD member countries: some guidelines for quality award organizers. *Public administration and development* 21: 27-40. DOI: 10.1002/pad.167
- Saarti, Jarmo (2018). Collection policies for the post-digital era of academic publishing: future scenarios for the academic libraries. In: Vattulainen, Pentti & O'Connor, Steve (eds.) *Repositories for Print: Strategies for Access, Preservation and Democracy*. De Gruyter Saur. *Current topics in library and information practice* 9. Pp. 103-112. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110535372-010>