2021 European Quality Assurance Forum

Building trust and enhancement: from information to evidence

Online event
18-19 November 2021

Call for contributions: Paper submission form

Deadline 26 July 2021

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

Author(s)

Name: Antonella Storti

Position: Quality Coordinator

Organisation: Turku UAS

Country: Finland

E-mail address: Antonella.storti@turkuamk.fi

Short bio (150 words max): [Due to the Finnish vacation period, the bio for Antonella Storti will be completed later]

Name: Eltjo Bazen

Position: Senior Quality Advisor

Organisation: HU UAS Utrecht

Country: the Netherlands

E-mail address: eltjo.bazen@hu.nl

Short bio (150 words max): Eltjo is active in QA of HE for more than 10 years, currently working as Senior Quality Advisor at HU UAS Utrecht in the Netherlands. As such he is advising programmes in their internal quality enhancement and external accreditation processes. In his profession his background in the studies of philosophy, business management and quality management are perfectly merged. On a national level he is part of several networks and working groups around QA of HE, both on system level and more executional. In Europe he is part of EURASHE's QA working group and member of the EQAR Register Committee.

Eltjo is the corresponding author and will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.

If there are several authors, please copy and fill in the fields for each author and indicate who is the corresponding author and who will be responsible for presenting the paper at the Forum.

IMPORTANT: If you are submitting a proposal, please do not register for the event online until the results of the selection process have been announced. Papers selected for EQAF 2021 will benefit from one reduced fee per contribution, which will be applied through a special registration process.

EQAF

European Quality Assurance Forum

During the Forum, the full text of all papers presented at the Forum will be published on the Forum website. If you do not wish your paper to be published, please indicate so here. This has no consequences on the selection of the papers.

Proposal

Title:

Benchlearning, a Finnish-Dutch case study of an enhancement oriented QA tool

Abstract (150 words max):

In the Finnish accreditation system, the element of benchlearning was introduced in 2018. Turku UAS grabbed the chance with this new method and invited HU UAS Utrecht, a long-time partner from the Netherlands, to dive in and see how much this method would bring both institutions. Focussing on the theme of Managing Societal Engagement and Impact, the institutions had to invent how this process should actually work. After elaborate preparations by the coordinators on both sides, in the online sessions of knowledge-domain specific groups (educational and research staff combined) best practices ware shared and their potential implementation in the other institution explored. The method of benchlearning was deemed a very useful one by most of the involved, and will be used more often as a tool for institutional learning.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.
No.

Indicate whether your contribution is based on practice, policy or research:
Practice

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Benchlearning, a Finnish-Dutch case study of an enhancement oriented QA tool

Introduction

Benchlearning is a new element adopted in the Finnish audit system by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) since 2018. Based on the principles of enhancement-led evaluation, the purpose of benchlearning is to receive feedback on one's own organisation's activities and to learn from the good practices of another organisation. As in benchmarking a similar organisation is used for reflection and evaluation. The main difference however is the goal: where benchmarking is often used for accountability, benchlearning is explicitly focussed on learning for both organisations. The subject of the benchlearning is up to the institution under audit, that is to say that one of four themes can be chosen.

Benchlearning or peer learning is understood as "a communal way of working, where learning from another community, active interaction, and commitment to mutual development are essential. Benchlearning is at its best a part of a long-term development partnership". Through benchlearning organisation will gain new insights to its practises and strengthen cooperation between each other.

> Benchlearning is a method applied in the audit. According to the principles of enhancement-led evaluation, the purpose of benchlearning is to receive feedback on the own organisation's activities and to learn from the good practices of another organisation. The HEI selects a target and a partner for benchlearning. The partner can be an HEI or any other type of cooperation organisation. The HEI selects the participants in the benchlearning process from within its higher education community.

Benchlearning as described by FINEEC in the Audit Manual.

Background and start of the process

As the benchlearning area was expected to cover comprehensively the strategic emphasis of Turku UAS, as the topic of the benchlearning the theme Managing Societal Engagement and Impact (MSEI) was chosen. The multidisciplinary Quality Team at Turku UAS in Finland traced down some alternatives for benchlearning targets and partners during the autumn 2019. Among a number of alternatives the Rector of Turku UAS proposed HU UAS Utrecht (Hogeschool Utrecht, or HU for short) from the Netherlands as benchlearning partner. HU welcomed this proposal wholeheartedly, since the theme itself fitted perfectly one of HU's central ambitions to work on mission driven challenges and this process was recognised as a novel way of reflecting and learning on this crucial subject. After HU approved the proposal both UAS's coordinators team started preparing the process.

Turku UAS and HU have been strategic partners since 2011 when the Consortium on Applied Research and Professional Education (CARPE) was founded. CARPE is a strategic alliance of seven European universities that aims to enhance cooperation in terms of joint RDI projects and educational programmes as well as student and staff exchanges. During the past 10 years, CARPE has received EU funding for over 30 joint RDI projects, organized bi-annual CARPE conferences, and hosted hundreds of Erasmus exchange students and teachers among its partners.

Benchlearning was seen as a natural option to further deepen the collaboration between Turku UAS and HU. HU has persistently developed methods for its societal engagement and impact over the past few years. Thus, the possibility to focus on this topic and share practises between Turku UAS and HU staff was considered important and challenging at the same time. In addition, both UAS were interested in finding out what kind of similarities and differences might occur in order to further strenghten the already existing practices.

Due to the COVID19 situation in 2020, the original plans had to be revised and Turku UAS and HU agreed that the benchlearning would have to take place online.
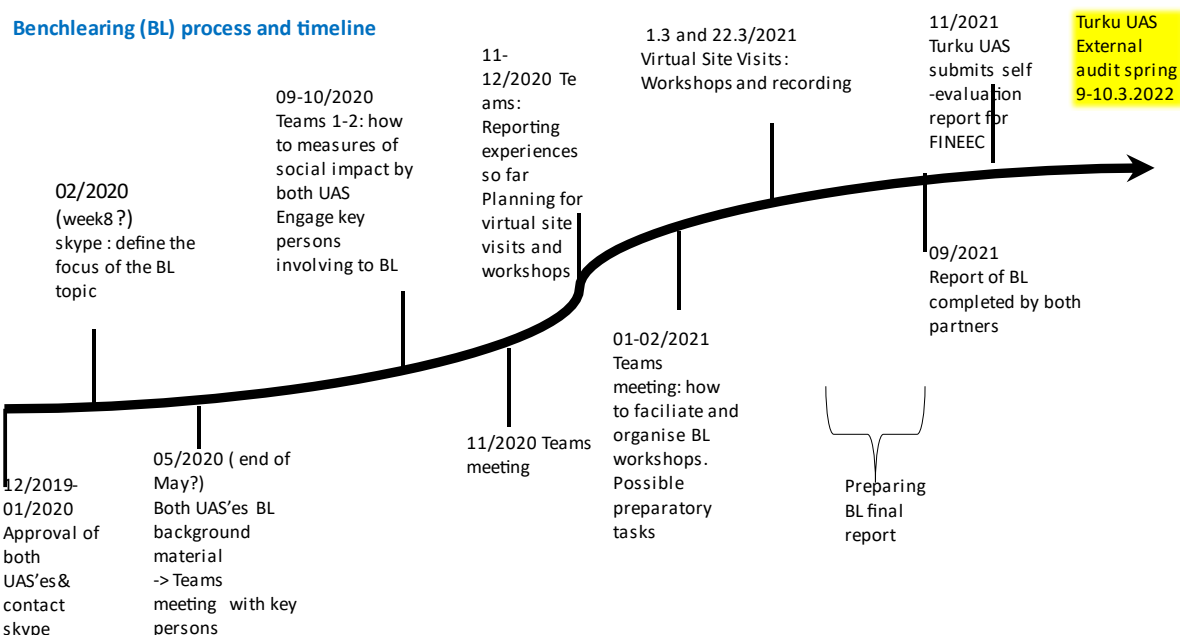
Picture 1: Timeline of the benchlearning process

Planning and preparation

The planning process for benchlearning started in January 2020. Both Turku UAS and HU formed its own team to coordinate the benchlearning. The first task for these teams was to plan the self-evaluation regarding MSEI on mutually agreed questions in the following three areas: education, RDI/practise-based research and services for business and other external stakeholders. The aim of the self-evaluation was to describe the procedures used by both UAS in order to enhance and strengthen the societal impact of their core duties (e.g., to find out how Turku UAS and HU manage activities that promote societal engagement and impact, how changes in the operational environment are analysed, how the information is used for setting the direction of future activities and how the outcomes on societal engagement and impact of UAS are measured). To support the joint planning, we created an online environment in Teams, the Coordinator Space: BL for Managing Societal Engagement and Impact which acted as a common working and communication space where the coordinating teams were able to share materials and prepare the online benchlearning sessions. We also created another environment Benchlearning: Managing Societal Engagement and Impact for the participants of the actual benchlearning sessions that were organized in the spring 2021.

During spring 2020, we shared and exchanged information not only about the selected topic MSEI but also about the quality assurance and audit systems at both UAS's. Since 2005, the higher education institutions in Finland are audited every six years by FINEEC. The Netherlands has almost equivalent audit system under which both all programmes offered at HU and the institution as a whole are audited externally every six years. Decisions based on the results of these audits are taken by the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). Since both FINEEC and NVAO are registered in EQAR, it is no surprise that the external quality assurance processes look en feel alike. But internally a lot of similarities were felt, for instance in the position of the central staff and the relationship with the educational programmes.

The coordinating teams at Turku UAS and HU worked together during twelve workshops. During the first six workshops, we introduced MSEI at both UAS and shared information about how the topic is taken into consideration in education, RDI and operating with external stakeholders. A template with relevant questions regarding MSEI was created together and both UAS filled in the answers and shared them in Teams before joining the workshops during which we had the possibility to make some further clarifications as well as discuss the processes at Turku UAS and HU. The last six workshops focused mostly on planning the practical matters related to the actual benchlearning sessions, such as creating and testing the online environment and the guidelines for and ways to engage the participants in the sessions.

The self-evaluation highlighted some similarities and differences regarding MSEI at Turku UAS and HU. As mentioned above, the national quality assurance systems of HEIs are fairly similar in Finland and the Netherlands. The roles of Finnish and Dutch UAS's in the higher education sector are also very similar as in both countries as UAS's have a strong emphasis on multidisciplinary and project-based learning in education, practice-based and applied research (or RDI) as well as partnerships and cooperation with the local world of work (in order to support the economic and societal development of the region). MSEI at Turku UAS and HU reflect these similarities in the strategy documents, annual implementation plans, indicators and measurement methods (e.g. graduate and stakeholder satisfaction levels). Self-evaluation also revealed some differences in terms of MSEI. For example, in 2015 HU has analysed its economic footprint which has not been the focus of MSEI at Turku UAS. Turku UAS, on the other hand, introduced some new processes and systems that support SMEI. Firstly, TEPPO Information System for Project Portfolio and Working Time Management which together with Project Life-Cycle Evaluation process and PM2 implementation tools have been a significant improvement for management, project follow-up and evaluation during last couple of years. Secondly, Turku UAS shared information about its extensively implemented customer relationship management system ASKO (Microsoft Dynamics 365) which is used for customer base analysis and customer work planning and development. The benchlearning session participants were invited to read in advance the self-evaluation materials that were shared in Teams.

EQAF

European Quality Assurance Forum

Benchlearning sessions

Two two-hour online benchlearning sessions were organized for Turku UAS and HU staff members in 2021 (in weeks 9 and 12). After the common introduction to the topic by members of both executive boards and some practical matters, the participants were divided into four groups. These groups consisted of three to four participants from both institutions, so six to eight in total per group. The participants for the groups were nominated according to the fields of study that both UAS have: Business, Engineering, Health Care and Wellbeing, and Arts and Media. Since it was felt that within these knowledge domains impact comes from both education and research, the decision was made for domain focussed groups that consist of staff from both educational and research background. Altogether there were 32 persons sharing good practises in the workshops. Additional to these people in the groups, during the round table discussions following the work in the break-out rooms there were also coordinators and rectors. The rectors had an active role during round table discussion.

Prior to the benchlearning sessions, the participants received a preparatory assignment that was shared in the online environment. The assignments introduced the topic that participants were asked to discuss in the four groups during the benchlearning session. Group sessions were followed by the joint round table session attended by all benchlearning participants.

During the first session, participants concentrated on sharing good practices identified at both UAS's. At the end of the session, per group one or two good practises were selected that could be developed further. The groups submitted their findings through Socrative, the online quiz tool. The discussion in all four groups was lively and yielded several good practices (Business group 9 best practices, Health Care and Wellbeing group 11, Engineering group 3 and Arts and Media group 9). During round table discussion each group presented shortly their findings to all benchlearning session participants. The material groups produced during the session was submitted and shared in the online environment.

The second benchlearning session focused on learning more about some of the good practices that were introduced during the first session and that were most promising to be implemented at the other institution, Turku UAS or HU. The participants received a reminder about the good practices examples from the first session a few days before the second session and during the session, the four groups continued their discussion with the help of some structured questions they were given in a PPT form. The group work was followed by a round table discussion that started by all four groups presenting in two minutes the key results and suggestions for good practices that could be implemented at Turku UAS or HU. After that, the session continued with a reflection by the (vice) rectors and ended with concluding words for the benchlearning work that had been carried out.

Some of the good practices regarding MSEI that were shared during the benchlearning session were the following:

-        Multiprofessional learning communities in society and broad thinking (educators, students, professionals)

-        Producing artistic work to define something

-        Smart Sustainable Cities minor

In addition, there were some questions and challenges related to MSEI that were brought up in the discussions during the two sessions. They included

-        the problem with small number of answers (e.g. feedback from students, working life)

-        lack of tools for measuring and evaluation of societal impact

-        uncertainty about the most important focus regarding SMEI

Conclusion

FINEEC identifies three main benefits of benchlearning in the Audit Manual. These are receiving feedback from peers regarding the current state of the organisation, gaining new insight and building social networks. It is more than fair to say that in both institutions these benefits were recognized. The

benchlearning process was absolutely well-received by the participants, the board and the organizing groups on both sides. It must be said that the work load for the preparatory groups on both sides was quite heavy, at least partially because we were obliged to work online only. As well the newness of the concept and the eagerness to deliver played a role. The coordinating group was very motivated and produced background material for Managing Societal Engagement and Impact (MSEI). The actual benchlearning sessions online worked well and based on the feedback that was collected from the participants, the method was considered successful. Almost 70% of the participants found comparison discussions with international peers inspiring and improving quality in MSEI. In addition, the participants considered that they had been given enough information and time for the benchlearning process. As well on board level, this method is seen as quality enhancement tool that will be used more often in the future.

"This is a tool that could be used also in a bigger group of universities in the future."

Benchlearning participant

References:
- FINEEC, *Audit Manual for Higher Education Institutions 2019-2024*.

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 26 July 2021 to eqaf@eua.eu. *The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.*