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How does quality assurance make a difference?

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Title: Quality enhancement through shared responsibilities: *How to use student and graduate tracking for strategic development and quality enhancement. A case study*

Abstract (150 words max): The presentation is a case study of how Lund University have used the mapping of existing student and graduate tracking initiatives within its faculties and central administration to introduce institution wide tracking and developed a policy for a shared responsibility. The collected data is used for evidence-based strategic development, quality enhancement and the development of a jointly defined level of minimum student support services in all faculties. The university leadership use the information collected through both analysis of KPIs and student and graduate surveys in annual "Quality Dialogues" with each faculty. The project is inspired by Lund University's participation in the recent EUA project: **"Tracking Learners' and Graduates' Progression Paths"**, 2012. The presentation will outline the processes involved and introduce a discussion on how the tracking of students and graduates through shared initiatives between faculties and the central administration can enhance strategic development and strengthen the institutional profile.

Quality enhancement through shared responsibilitiesMaking a difference by sharing responsibilities: *How to use student and graduate tracking for strategic development and quality enhancement: A case study*

Introduction

Lund University established in the beginning of 2011 inspired by the participation in the EUA project: **"Tracking Learners' and Graduates' Progression Paths"**, 2012, a project group that was asked to identify or to map how the eight faculties and the central administration collected and used the tracking of students and graduates for quality enhancement and strategic development. The intention of the internal project was to gain a deeper insight into LU's own practice; to develop a better understanding of the possible impact of tracking the progression path of students and graduates and identify a minimum level for student support service throughout the university. The intention was to create the foundations for a common knowledge base at Lund University for tracking of students and graduates (national and international), and draw up recommendations for how to strengthen the university identity as a world-class university by introducing common routines for all faculties.

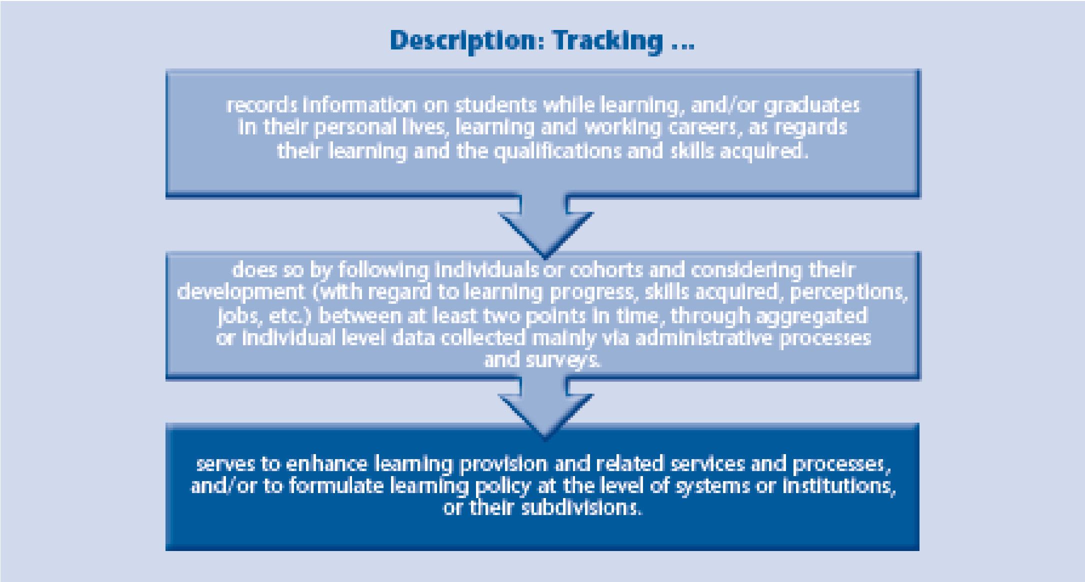
In October 2010, EUA (European University Association), launched in cooperation with five European partners, the "TRACKIT!" project. Partners in the project were the European University Association (EUA); Irish Universities Association/UCD Geary Institute; Hochschul-Informations-System GmBH (HIS); Lund University (LU); The University of the Peloponnese/Centre for Social and Educational Policy Studies; Danish School of Education, Aarhus University. The project was supported by the European Union's "Lifelong Learning Programme". The aim of the project was to conduct a comparative study of how European higher education institutions track the progression paths of students into higher education, through education and into employment. The project identified a number of international, national and institutional models and different driving forces for student and graduate tracking. It particularly highlighted the strategic use of the data collected on students and graduates, and assessed the impact on HEIs and their students.

The project found no agreed definition at European level of what tracking actually is, the project consortium thus did not embark on this exercise with a predefined notion of tracking. Instead it adopted an empirical, deductive approach, in analysing a wide range of monitoring and surveying initiatives, related to data collections and support services at institutional and national levels. Initially it considered tracking all systematic approaches that a HEI introduces to follow:

- students' progression paths during their studies towards gaining a qualification
- entry and progression graduates in the labour market
- entry and progression of graduates into other educational programme

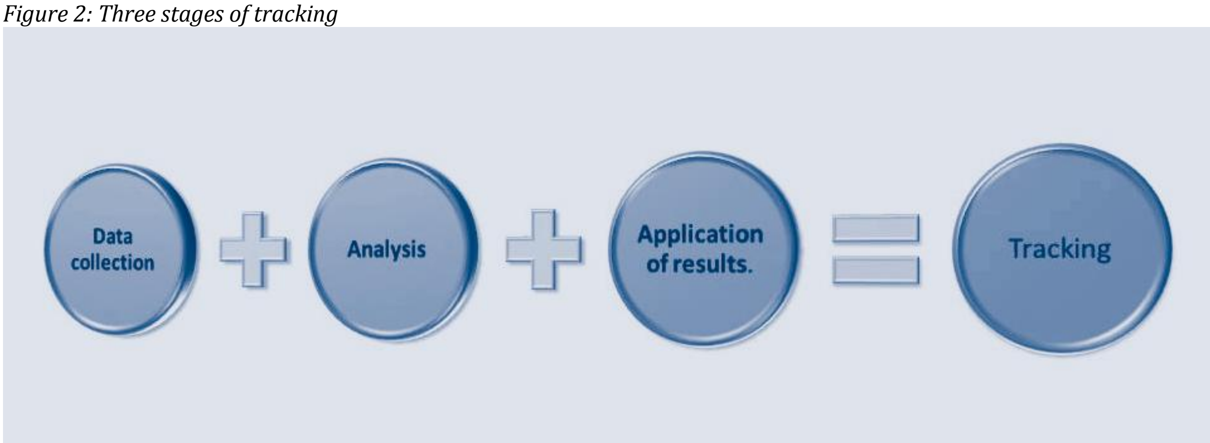
The report developed a description of tracking:

Figure 1: Description of Tracking



It identified that tracking consists of three stages:

Figure 2: Three stages of tracking



The report found that these three steps are not always necessarily carried out by the same actor. For example, tracking might use data established by other initiatives for other purposes, raising the important question of how it is shared within institutions, national bodies and beyond, and later published.

The EUA report is based on information collected from 31 countries through interviews with national correspondents. The interviews created the background for a description of national practices for tracking. In addition, the project mapped the practices of tracking in 23 educational institutions in 11 countries through institutional site-visits.

Global and local drivers

European higher education looks back on a decade of reform, under the umbrella of the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy. As the structural parts of the reform -i.e. the introduction of three degree cycles have been widely implemented, one of the core goals - the move towards student-centred learning – is receiving increased attention and questions are increasingly being raised what the impact has been?

Higher education targets are not only to increase the numbers of learners, but also to attract learners with much more diverse backgrounds. Changes in higher learning and teaching are overdue: Learning has to be research-based yet skills-oriented and flexible in provision and allow for the learners to develop their individual learning paths, to reorient their learning and also, to fit studying into timetables that allows time for work and family. In other words to develop student centred learning is a continuing challenge, but equally challenging is tracking the progression paths of these students.

The project group at Lund University identified a number of common global and local drivers within the university that corresponded to the external drivers found in the EUA project:

- The Bologna Process (in Sweden this has meant the introduction of the master degree in 2007 and has thus meant that there is an increasing need to know what the introduction has meant for students and for the university)
- Rapidly growing number of students (student numbers have increased by 30 % at Lund University between 2007 and 2012)
- Growing diversification in types of students (Sweden have a long tradition of lifelong learners, but have only since 2007 started to actively recruit international full-degree students)
- Increased focus on quality assurance (Sweden have introduced a new controversial national quality assurance system that focus solely on learning outcomes)
- Increased focus on autonomy and accountability (Sweden introduced an autonomy bill in 2011)

The global and local drivers illustrate how complex the issue of higher education teaching and learning has become. Unlike in the past, today's higher education institutions not only have to convey academic and professional knowledge and research skills, but a wider range of generic skills, including the ability to self-learn – as in rapidly changing economic and social contexts – more often than not, graduates will work in jobs for which they have not been specifically educated or trained for. While one of the original objectives of the Bologna Process was to ensure that qualifications awarded make graduates principally employable, i.e. respond to professional and labour market requirements, currently it seems to become shorthand for whether graduates find a job, and thus becomes a much contested indicator for the value of higher education.

Trends in global higher education has at Lund University become interchangeable with institutional and national trends and these have led to greater interest in tracking the progression paths of students and graduates in order to determine who the students are, how they progress and what they do after graduation. To develop methods for assessing throughput and success rates for students and their employability has taken on a greater importance for the strategic development of programmes and courses for the growing and increasingly heterogeneous groups of students. A more systematic knowledge about students and graduates (retention, throughput and their employability together with the results of student and graduate surveys) is considered essential to generate the necessary information for a continuous improvement of the **content** and **quality** of courses, programs, and support functions (student information, study and career guidance, international desk). The global and national trends also means greater demands for accountability (nationally and internationally)and Lund University are responding to the demand by using the results of student and graduate tracking to enhance the strategic profile of the university, but also to enhance the quality of the student experience.

Methodology

The Lund project is based on interviews with representatives from different part of the central administration (the student administration and student support unit, the quality and evaluation unit, the external relations unit (internationalisation), the planning unit and the leadership support unit), their counterparts at the faculty level (vice-deans, student counselors, programme responsible and academics) and student representatives to map out practices in place and to understand how these were used either to support students and graduates or how the data was used for strategic development work. The main questions were:

- How is key figures collected and to what end?
- Which initiatives are in place to track students before during and after their studies?
- How can a better coordination of practices on student tracking and student support services enhance and contribute to the long-term development of teaching and learning and student support services?
- How can the tracking of students and graduates be used to develop a minimum level of student support services for all Lund University students?

The responses from the different representatives were sorted according to faculty and presented in figures for each faculty. The interviews and the figures made it possible to identify best practices. The material was analysed and the material was used to formulate recommendations to the Council for Education.

Diversity in practice – identifying Key Performance Figures

The collection of student data at LU is organised centrally in a joint database for all faculties and is part of a common database co-hosted by the Swedish higher education sector. In some faculties this database has been enhanced by supplementary data as they saw fit. A common problem voiced by both faculty representatives and the central administration was that it was very difficult to extrapolate statistical data or key performance indicators (KPI) from this database (LADOK). Coinciding with the Trackit project LU started to develop a data warehouse that could run reports based on LADOK and thus produce targeted reports for specific target groups (Institutional Leadership, Deans, Programme managers, student counsellors etc.) The interviews revealed a great need for more readily available KPIs and for tracking the progression path of students, but also pointed to a great diversity in approach and practice between faculties, partly due to historic reasons, the structure of the programmes within each faculty and partly due to the question of available resources to carry out tracking and using the results for quality enhancement (human and financial). Three faculties faced particular problems in tracking their students as their students had a large degree of freedom to combine courses (free-floating courses)towards a degree.

Despite the diversity in practice the faculty representatives identified four common internal driving forces underlying the need for identification in relation to the development of program development at Lund University: (1) demographic changes, (2) increased focus on retention and (3) development of educational environments. The interviews also revealed agreement on a fourth point (4), a modified approach in terms of the University's commitment to its students and of students ' attitude toward the University.

Identified common challenges, routines and tools

The project group developed a recommendation for a joint institutional policy based on the interviews that was adopted by the Council for Education in May 2012. It is currently being implemented and builds on the recommendation that common policies regarding the collection and use of KPIs is introduced and a minimum level of student support is identified. It also requires a close collaboration between the leadership, central administration and the faculties where some faculties will share their practice and others adopt. The intention is that the central administration will be able to provide all faculties with data and analysis of different kinds of surveys that follow the students through the student life cycle at LU. The faculties will concentrate on using the results of the new routines and the introduction of new tools to improve the student support. An expected (side) effect is that these initiatives will also provide better data and information that can be used to enhance the pedagogical development of teaching and learning.

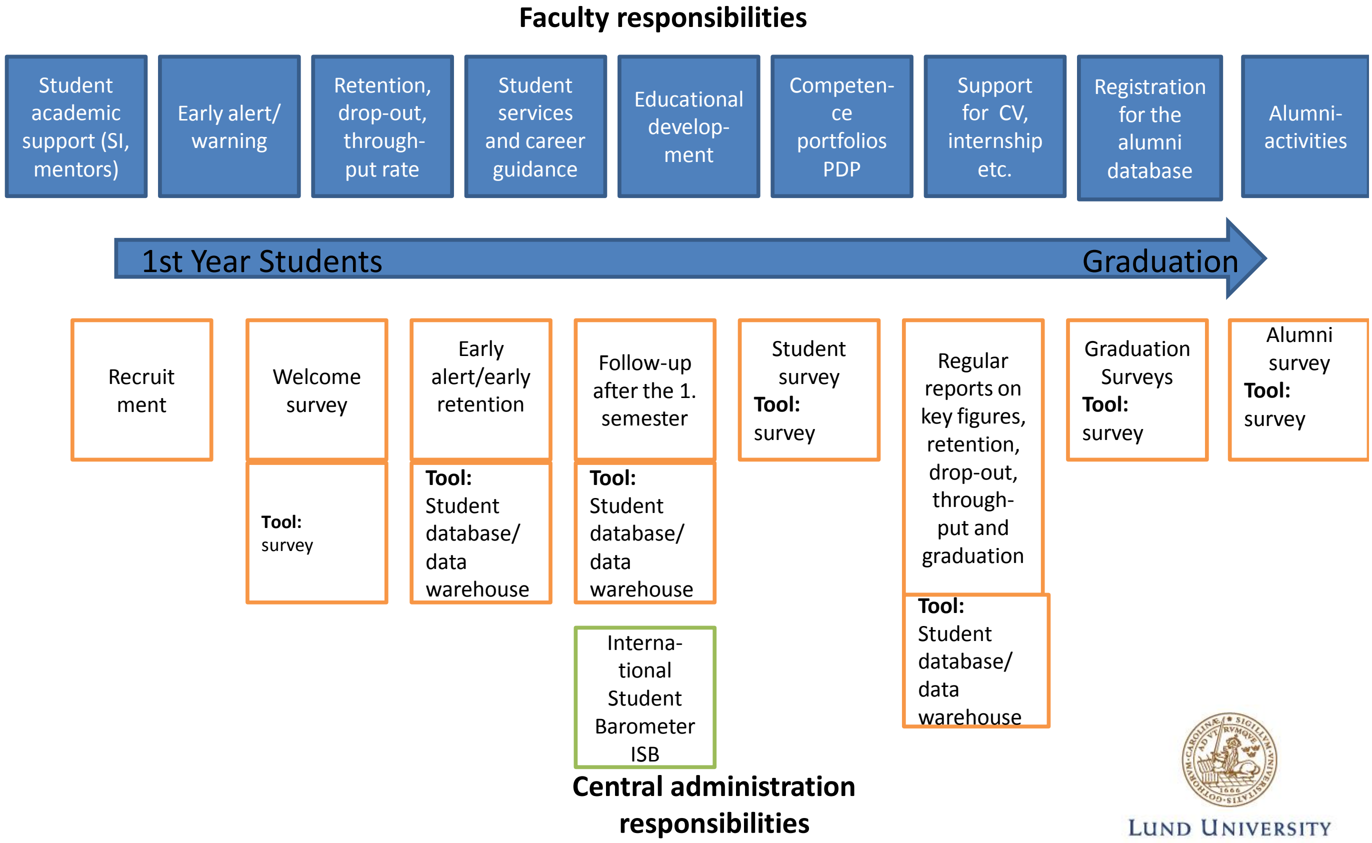
New routines and tools
The recommendation is to develop common institutional procedures for the collection and analysis of KPIs on students (national and international) before, during, and after their studies using the data warehouse and Customer Relations Management (CRM) supported by the central administration.

- The transfer of data from LADOK to the data warehouse should be improved. It will lead to a simplification and savings of (human) resources on faculty and departmental level.
- Define institution wide KPIs that can be broken down to faculty and department level. The definitions will take into account both common and specific follow-up needs at programme, faculty and university level and create opportunities for follow-up over time.
- The existing student and graduate surveys have a good balance between common, specific and long-term questions. This will be the model for the development of the common internet based questionnaires (welcome survey, exit poll, thematic student and graduate studies and course evaluations and will allow for benchmarking between department and faculties.
- The university will ensure that all students are offered targeted student support independent of which faculty they attend (Early alert and early warning system (specific attention should be paid towards ensure a minimum level of student support at all faculties during the first semester which can promote retention),access/invitation to student counseling, study planning, Supplementary Instruction (SI), career planning and guidance, etc.).
- KPIs and information will where appropriate be used in the University's marketing and information for future and current students.
- Introduce differentiated follow-up systems for different groups of students (international full-degree students (has already been introduced), students with a non-traditional background, as well as lifelong learning students).
- Build on existing networks for study and career guidance counselors and internationalisation to share knowledge and experience in a comprehensive and systematic manner for sharing best practices and working methods around issues such as retention, widening participation and internationalisation.
  (see figure 3).

The university will base much of the institution wide tracking of students on a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) that originally had been intended only for the fee paying international dull-degree students, but it quickly became evident that such a system should include the entire student population.

Figure 3

Tracking and supporting the progression paths of students and graduates at institutional level – a responsibility for central administration and faculties



Communicating the goals

The positive outcome of the project is based on the involvement of a great number of representatives from different parts of the university (bottom-up involvement), the use of an outside project coordinator with no vested interest and the extensive communication on project goals and progress within the university. The focus was maintained by frequent presentations to different university boards on teaching and learning and widening participation, and by publishing articles in the internal university journal. The project was thus able to create a common understanding of the importance to develop a university-wide policy for of tracking at all levels within the university and the need to use the results to enhance the student experience.

The recommendations are based on the identified joint responsibilities between the central administration and the faculties (see figure 3). The introduction of new analytical tools has made it possible for the central administration together with the faculties to develop surveys and KPIs based on LADOK, CRM and a data warehouse that can be used by the faculties to enhance especially the crucial first year experience and promote retention. The project group were inspired by Tinto and Thomas' theories on the importance of early retention and creating inclusive study environments especially for non-traditional students.

The result of the mapping exercise is an important step towards identifying, building and sharing knowledge about best practice with regard to the collection and use of key figures, in order to develop recruitment, promote retention and support students in both when it comes to academic and social integration. The project revealed a plethora of good practice, but only a couple of the faculties had an overview that allowed them to track the whole student life-cycle and use this to adjust their practices.

Fit for purpose – creating a quality enhancement system

The faculty that had the best practice for tracking students and graduates and re-cycling the information into quality enhancing initiatives and developments made a very important point during the interviews. It had experienced that it was essential to only collect data and information that can be used **directly** for quality enhancement, rather than focus on all the "nice to know" questions. The faculty used the example of information on student background. It had found it very difficult to use this information in a targeted way and found that the access or welcome survey could be used to identify students who had queries and concerns that could lead to direct contact. It had found over the past decade that it was much more difficult to develop initiatives that singled out specific students because of their background if they did not themselves indicate that they needed support. The faculty therefore had ceased to request information on social and economic background and instead formulated questions where the student could indicate that they had concerns or questions. It also caused the faculty to develop a host of welcome activities, student teachers and readily available student counsellors. The student background information that was useful was related to the secondary school and the area this was placed in. The information was used in some universities to actively engage and recruit potential students from schools where the per cent age that goes into higher education is low or in other faculties to attract students from secondary schools that in general had proved to have a high retention rate.

Taking control of the narrative and engaging the students

In the words of Lee Schulman, 2007, Lund University has started to "take control of the narrative and engage their students" by accumulating more knowledge about LU students. The project was thus also inspired by Shulman's:

*Seven Pillars of Assessment for Accountability***:**

- ***1. Become explicit about the story you need to tell and the rationale for choosing it. An account is one story among the many that*** *could be told about the quality and character of an educational experience. No instrument can claim validity; no account can earn a warrant, without a clear explanation of why this story is being told instead of others.*
- ***2. Do not think that there is a "bottom line." An early step in the deployment of any instrument, new or old, should be a process of*** *locating the instrument in a larger conceptual framework that explicitly stipulates what it does measure and what it does not.*
- ***3. Design multiple measures. As the stakes associated with a measurement rise, the restrictions on its form raise concomitantly—thus the*** *need to move from judgment to measurement and from interpretation to objectivity.*
- ***4. Work on combining multiple measures. A fourth principle is that a set of instruments, each with its own scores, indices, and*** *observations, will*

deliver on its promise only if we take on the hard task of developing rules for deciding how to display, organize, and aggregate those indicators for making decisions.

- ***5. Remember that high stakes corrupt. A fifth principle is that high stakes attached to assessments have a tendency to distort the*** *educational and evaluation processes they were intended to support.*
- ***6. Embed assessment into ongoing instruction. Assess early and assess often.***
- ***7. Become an active and collaborative site for research on new forms of assessment, new technologies to support such work, and better strategies for integration of such approaches with instruction.***

LU has through this project acknowledged the responsibility to publish reliable data and information, and does not want to leave it up to other stakeholders to tell its story as e.g. the employers organisation that may have a biased view and – in the case of Sweden does not publish the methodology behind the figures. National data collection in general often have a problem of not being able to break the data down to faculty level and programme level, and if that is not possible it is of little use for strategic development.

Making a difference by creating consensus and sharing the responsibility

The results of the different tracking initiatives (KPIs and survey results) are included in the "Quality Dialogues" that the institutional leadership carries out annually with all the faculties and has contributed to the development of a sense of shared responsibility for quality assurance and strategic development and actively used to enhance quality of the student experience.

The dialogues are prepared by collecting KPI about retention, student support services, internationalisation and graduation rates. These are discussed and consolidated in a pre-meeting so that the discussions during the dialogues are not focused on the validity of the data, but rather focus on relevant themes. Other results from surveys and other quality enhancement projects are included in the discussion. The next step in the development of a shared responsibility for quality enhancement is that the Deans carry out their own quality dialogues with the departments/programmes before the quality dialogues between the leadership and the faculties – thus including all levels in developing a responsibility for quality assurance.

In a large internationally oriented university with 47 000 students, 8 faculties and 6 800 employees divided into three campuses the commitment to take responsibility for our own narrative is challenging as it is to introduce a policy that is "fit for purpose" for all faculties and builds on developed practices on how to best track students and graduates. Lund University partnership in the recent EUA project: "Tracking Learners' and Graduates' Progression Paths", 2012 was an inspiration and a driver to develop a common a policy spanning the whole university and ensuring the development of a joint responsibility between faculties and the leadership.

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Questions for discussion:

- Why should HEIs track students and graduates?
- What should HEIs track?
- How should the collected information be used?
- How to ensure that the results of tracking are used to enhance the development of the higher education institution?
- Tracking at different levels: European, national and institutional – do they interact? Should they interact? If so, how can that best be done?