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Using ELearning Benchmarking as a Strategy to Foster Institutional ELearning Strategic Planning

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Project objectives

An institutional level benchmarking exercise should enable various stakeholders at the University to reflect on a number of aspects relating to eLearning. By engaging the major practitioners of eLearning in benchmarking, the dialogue between them has the potential to foster sustainable changes at an institutional level.

Description of process and deliverables

We approached the benchmarking task in three stages. First, we studied the benchmarks used in the many projects reported in the literature in order to arrive at a consolidated version that is appropriate to be used in the local context. In this first stage, stakeholders to be involved were identified and actively engaged in the process (Stage 1). Then, benchmarking meetings were organized. The summary of these meetings can support the existing eLearning Strategic Plan in its implementation. Given the timing of the project, the exercise also addressed the issue of finding a unified eLearning platform for CUHK. There were discussions for the evaluation criteria of any recommended learning-management system (Moodle, Blackboard, etc.). Potential platforms were evaluated based on the criteria (Stage 2). Towards the end of the project, we monitored the progress of the planned actions and revisited the benchmarks (Stage 3).

Stage 1 – consolidation of evaluation instruments

One way to ensure a robust institutional eLearning strategy is to benchmark practices at one's own university with universities elsewhere. The use of international benchmarking is an emerging trend that can assist institutions to see how their own practice compares with broadly similar institutions elsewhere. Benchmarking projects can be set up by individual institutions wishing to reflect holistically across a number of issues in order to prioritize resource allocation, or can be set up as specific collaborative projects seeking best practice in the field. Some recent and influential models are reported in Phillips, McNaught, and Kennedy (2011, pp. 177–178).

- "The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE) benchmarks were first piloted in 2004. They include 74 questions separated into eight areas such as planning, policy, staff development, staff support, learner support, etc. (ACODE, 2007a&b). The model guides an institution to identify the potential improvement areas through self-assessment and/or collaborative assessment with other institutions (Sankey *et al.*, 2009).
- Another Australasian model is the E-Learning Maturity Model (eMM), first compiled in 2003, which focuses on assessment of e-learning capability using 35 process areas within 5 process categories (Marshall, 2007). It provides the opportunity for institutions to observe and evaluate the maturity of institutional processes but it is quite resource-intensive (Adamson & Plenderleith, 2008).
- The UK model, Embedding Learning Technologies Institutionally (ELTI), was begun in 2003 with funding from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC); it contains 12 factors in three general areas (Institute of Learning and Research Technology, ILRT, 2003a). It suggests multiple operational processes for an institution (ILRT, 2003b) and it includes a range of open-ended questions to be completed by people with different roles across the institution (ILRT, 2003a).
- The Pick & Mix model, which looks for commonalities of approach, was developed by a benchmarking consultant, Paul Bacsich, in early 2005 (Bacsich, 2006a,b).The design of this approach was based on an extensive literature review and the adoption of other frameworks and benchmarking methodologies. The details of the benchmarking coverage and processes of this approach are regularly updated (Bacsich, 2009). Apart from the 30 suggested domains in version 2.5, there are also other 57 optional domains. It is a relatively comprehensive model but users are given the flexibility to choose what they would like to study based on their needs and particular situation (Adamson & Plenderleith, 2007)."

After extensive evaluation of the eLearning benchmarking models that are available worldwide, the eLearning benchmarking exercise at CUHK is largely adapted from the model developed by the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and ELearning and laid down in the document: 'ACODE benchmarks for eLearning in universities and guidelines for use' (ACODE, 2007a&b). The exercise enabled stakeholders at CUHK to reflect upon current practices in the promotion of eLearning strategies with regard to international criteria and standards in eight areas.

The overall benchmarking exercise has allowed us to investigate the following eight areas (or benchmarks) that are related to institutional implementation and promotion of eLearning. Descriptions of each of these eight benchmarks are found in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptions of the eight ACODE benchmarks

No.	Theme	Description	No. of questions
1	Institution policy and governance for technology supported learning and teaching	The first ACODE area focuses on the institution policy and governance for technology supported learning and teaching. The coverage of this area could include institution-level planning, policy development and implementation in relation to the application of technologies for learning and teaching. It also includes the delegation of authority and responsibility for developing, implementing, evaluating and responding to results of policies and strategic and operational/ functional plans.	8
2	Planning for, and quality improvement of the integration of technologies for learning and teaching	The second ACODE area focuses on the planning for, and quality improvement of the integration of technologies for learning and teaching. Institution-wide quality-assurance processes ensure the appropriate use of technologies in learning and teaching. These processes include planning, implementation, evaluation and feedback loops.	8
3	Information technology infrastructure to support learning and teaching	The third ACODE area focuses on a range of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that are used to support learning and teaching. It can include the use of productivity software, learning-management systems, library systems, the World Wide Web and mobile technologies. Hardware such as computers, telecommunications and ancillary equipment, internal Local Area Network Systems and Wide Area Network Systems (LANS and WANS) and external networks which are used for the purposes of learning and teaching are also included. These technologies support learning on and off campus.	9
4	Pedagogical application of information and communication technology	The fourth ACODE area addresses the effective application of ICT to support institution learning and teaching. It encompasses the underlying rationale and strategic intent of ICT, how it is embedded in institutional teaching, how it is resourced and how it is evaluated. The pedagogical application of ICT is a developing area that has the potential to impact on every student and staff member, and failure to apply ICT in pedagogically sound ways will reduce the value of infrastructure investment, and may detract from the ability of the institution to meet its teaching and learning goals.	13

5	Professional/ staff development for the effective use of technologies for learning and teaching	The fifth ACODE area focuses on developing teaching staff in making effective use of technologies for learning and teaching. Professional and staff development activities encompass those that are conducted individually or in a group, and that could be performed face-to-face or online. In addition, both one-way activities and interactional events should be accounted to this category. Therefore, self-directed learning activities/ resources are also included. In establishing these activities, professional development should be designed and delivered to meet the strategic needs of the organization as well as to meet the demands of teaching staff.	8
6	Staff support for the use of technologies for learning and teaching	Benchmark six focuses on the staff support for the use of technologies for learning and teaching. It deals with members of staff who want to use technologies but encounter difficulties while using them and need ready access to assistance. The definition of assistance can be further broken down into two parts: technical and educational support. In terms of technical support, it is the assistance that deals with problems or needs related to the technological environment, straddling hardware and software, communications and connections, and performance. In terms of educational support, it is the assistance that addresses the needs of staff who wants to maximize student learning outcomes.	9
7	Student training for the effective use of technologies for learning	The seventh ACODE area focuses on training students for the effective use of technologies for learning. 'Technologies for learning' describes a range of ICTs that are used to support learning and teaching. These can include the use of: computers and productivity software; learning-management systems; library systems; the Web; mobile technologies. This also encompasses technologies used on and off campus. Aspects of an ethical approach to the use of learning technologies are also relevant here. Student training refers to the applied use of such technologies in a learning context. It can take many forms and be provided by many people, for example through: specific training classes; self study; or as part of a unit of study. Staff providing the training need appropriate skills which require alignment to the professional/ staff development benchmark. Student training does not encompass training in other aspects of learning development (i.e. general study skills).	9

8	Student support for the use of technologies for learning	Benchmark eight focuses on the student support for the use of technologies for learning. Support for students in the use of technologies for learning is defined as primarily technical, but the learning context should be considered. Support should be considered in terms of the use of on-campus student computer facilities and the use of technologies from a distance. This support service could also include the use of: computers and productivity software; learning-management systems; library systems; the Web; and mobile technologies.	10

Stage 2 – benchmarking meetings and recommendations for improvements
Five meetings were held for stakeholders in total for the discussion of the eight benchmarks as highlighted above. In each meeting, participants discussed and rated quantitatively their responses to a number of criteria as specified on the ACODE documents. Table 2 shows the arrangements of each of the five meetings: the benchmarks dealt with, the time and duration of the meetings and the role of the participants who were present.

Table 2: The five meetings held and the participants

Benchmarks	**Time**	**Participants**
1 and 2	2/6/2011 10:00am – 11:00am	• Director, ITSC • Division Head of Academic Support Division, ITSC • Director and Professor of Learning Enhancement, CLEAR • Assistant Professor, CLEAR
3	30/5/2011 10:00am – 11:30am	• Associate Director of Infrastructure Division, ITSC • Sub-Librarian of Public Services, ULS • Division Head of Academic Support Division, ITSC • Assistant Professor, CLEAR
4	24/5/2011 2:30pm – 4:30pm	• Director and Professor of Learning Enhancement, CLEAR • Instructor, Department of Decision Sciences and Managerial Economics • Professional Consultant, The Nethersole School of Nursing • Professor, Department of Decision Sciences and Managerial Economics • Division Head of Academic Support Division, ITSC • Assistant Professor, CLEAR
5 and 6	23/5/2011 2:30 pm – 4:30 pm	• Associate Dean (Education) of Science • Associate Dean (Education) of Engineering • Sub-Librarian of Information, Research and Instructional Services Department, ULS • Division Head of Academic Support Division, ITSC • Assistant Professor, CLEAR
7 and 8	27/5/2011	• Chairman, Student IT Competence Committee

	2:30pm – 4:00pm	• Assistant Librarian I of Information, Research and Instructional Services Department, ULS • Director, Office of Student Affairs • Division Head of Academic Support Division, ITSC • Assistant Professor, CLEAR

Apart from holding the above-mentioned meetings, we found the need to further collect teachers' comments to Benchmarks 5 and 6 through consulting our eLearning Liaison Persons (eLLPs) using a survey. ELLPs are department- and school-based staff who act as liaison and information-conduit staff on eLearning-related matters. The eLLPs were invited to fill in a questionnaire (Appendix) in an eLLP event on 10 November 2011. Twenty-one eLLPs attended the event, 14 of them replied to the questionnaire. The result of this survey served as one more source of evidence concerning the two benchmarks under concern.

A five-point star-rating system was used to make an overall judgment on each of the questions associated with each benchmark. These star ratings were considered together with the questionnaire data to make overall summaries of the University's position on the various benchmarks. It must be appreciated that these ratings are the perceptions of key stakeholders. The value of the exercise is that these perceptions have been shared and discussed, and made available for other decision makers to consider. The overall findings are summarized in Table 3 using a three-point scale of 'doing well' (3); 'key areas of strength but some variability' (2); 'needs strengthening' (1).

Table 3: Overall summary of benchmark data

No.	**Theme**	**Summary of position in terms of a three-point scale** (key in text)
1	Institution policy and governance for technology supported learning and teaching	2
2	Planning for, and quality improvement of the integration of technologies for learning and teaching	2
3	Information technology infrastructure to support learning and teaching	3
4	Pedagogical application of information and communication technology	2
5	Professional/ staff development for the effective use of technologies for learning and teaching	2
6	Staff support for the use of technologies for learning and teaching	1
7	Student training for the effective use of technologies for learning	3
8	Student support for the use of technologies for learning	2

Stage 3 – action and change
The work in the last stage mainly concerned the dissemination of findings as well as possibilities leading to improvements and changes:

- Detailed reports have been compiled to disseminate findings and suggestions as a result of the benchmarking activities to various stakeholders.
- Discussions have begun on conversations with the various stakeholders to develop action plans for improvements.
- This report was compiled early in 2012.

Evaluation of outcomes
The relationship and dialogue between the various parties have the potential to foster sustainable changes at a high level. The benchmarking exercise could have significant impact on the development of the institutional eLearning Strategic Plan. The system-level changes should then lead to teaching and learning enrichments that benefit teachers and students. In the longer term, the study has the potential to impact on eLearning benchmarking practice in other local universities as well.

Both strengths and weaknesses regarding institutional effort in promoting eLearning were identified as a result of the benchmarking exercise. We can anticipate that this better understanding will lead to improvements in various domains of our work in supporting eLearning at CUHK.

In brief, the work at CUHK in hardware and infrastructure has been excellent and the technologies supported have been up-to-date. The training and support given to students to make better use of the technology for learning has been adequate too.

The main weaknesses, however, are not about hardware but more on 'software': i.e. the services and processes involved in enabling the use of eLearning strategies, especially among teachers. Specific areas we may work on include:

- The provision of clear institutional policy concerning eLearning and effective dissemination of the policy to teachers.
- Better integration of an evaluation process into many of the services and support we do such that evaluation data are systematically reviewed and can lead to continuous improvement.
- Teachers could be better informed of pedagogical applications of the technology with clear indication of how new technologies can facilitate effective learning activities and enhanced learning outcomes. At present there are several sessions but the incentives to attend these sessions are not compelling.
- Training and support to teachers in using eLearning strategies should also be revisited. The essence is to understand teachers' needs and adjust services and support to best meet their needs. Also, additional channels should be explored for messages and news to spread to all teachers more effectively.

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* Originally sourced from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) UK website but not available in July 2012.

Appendix

eLearning Support and Services Questionnaire
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Contact person: Mr Eric Ho (eric.ho@cuhk.edu.hk), CLEAR, CUHK

We would like to know your opinions on the work done by the University to support the use of technology in teaching and learning. The information collected is for research purposes only and will be kept in strict confidence. Your views will not be revealed to your Department Chair.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I know what the 'Integrated Framework for Curriculum Development and Review' (Integrated Framework) is. **Please jump to Question 3 if your answer to Question 1 is "No"**	Yes ○			No ○	
2.	The new eLearning platform Blackboard Learn should be able to support what the University wants to achieve as specified in the Integrated Framework.	⑤	④	③	②	①
3.	I know about the University's eLearning Strategy. **Please jump to Question 5 if your answer to Question 3 is "No"**	Yes ○			No ○	
4.	I think the University's eLearning Strategy covers most of the important areas concerning the support of eLearning at the University.	⑤	④	③	②	①
5.	I think the choice of Blackboard Learn as our future eLearning platform has been based on sound research and good practice.	⑤	④	③	②	①
6.	The current eLearning Service provides clear guidelines for eLearning applications for teachers to follow.	⑤	④	③	②	①
7.	Examples of good practice are available for teachers to use as reference.	⑤	④	③	②	①
8.	The eLLP community enhances the communication and promotion of the innovative use of pedagogical applications in learning and teaching.	⑤	④	③	②	①
9.	Professional development covering eLearning pedagogy is available for teaching staff.	⑤	④	③	②	①
10.	Professional development covering eLearning pedagogy is actively used by teaching staff.	⑤	④	③	②	①
11.	There are processes for my department to identify the needs of individual staff for eLearning support.	⑤	④	③	②	①
12.	Teachers have access to educational and technical expertise for development and advice on eLearning.	⑤	④	③	②	①
13.	Adequate information is provided about current and emerging technology for teaching and learning.	⑤	④	③	②	①
14.	My department has a specific plan to support eLearning (including strategies or support).	⑤	④	③	②	①
15.	My department actively promotes eLearning services to staff.	⑤	④	③	②	①

If you want the eLearning Service to contact you for any kind of follow-up consultation, please provide your name here: _____. Also, it would be useful if you could tell us the area/ topic you would like to know more about:

_____

- Thank You -