INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION FOR QUALITY: A CASE STUDY OF FOSTERING COLLABORATION ACROSS AN INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES THROUGH AN ACTIVITY BASED BENCHMARKING PROJECT

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Abstract

The risks in collaborating are high, but the rewards can be significant. Like any business investment, collaboration requires considered planning, clear communication and careful relationship management. The reward of working with others outside of traditional boundaries offers great potential for realising innovation beyond what one party can achieve alone. In a climate of competition for local and national resources, sharing on an international level offers great potential for harnessing collaborative activity.

This paper outlines the initial stages of establishing collaboration across an international network of university libraries through an activity-based benchmarking project. The Matariki Network of Universities includes: Dartmouth College, Durham University, Queen’s University, the University of Otago, Tübingen University, the University of Western Australia, and Uppsala University. The university libraries are collaborating on developing a series of common international measures. Rather than measuring and comparing traditional processes, the project focuses on activities that support wider institutional strategic imperatives. This will provide a better understanding of our progress in an environment of increasing need to demonstrate value and provide evidence of successful outcomes. Sharing in this endeavour on an international level will offer more scope to assess measures than could be achieved at a local or regional level.

Using the collaboration continuum as a framework, the activities and approaches employed by the project team are mapped out. A variety of communication methods and tools are successfully employed in the project. Face to face meetings provide opportunities to acquire tacit knowledge to support project decisions, to build relationships, and to develop shared visions. Developing a collaborative workspace enables information exchange to suit timeframes and to promote engagement. Attention to varied and competing priorities continues to be required as the long term benefits of collaboration are considered.
This case study provides strategic and practical aspects in developing a collaborative activity-based benchmarking project.

Keywords


Introduction

This paper outlines the initial stages of establishing collaboration across an international network of university libraries through an activity-based benchmarking project. Using the collaboration continuum as a framework, the activities and approaches employed by the project management team are mapped out. Strategic and practical aspects in developing the project are considered. This case study will be relevant to others considering, or involved in, establishing international collaborative projects.

The Matariki Network

The Matariki Network of Universities (http://www.matarikinetwork.com/) is an international collaborative venture that has been established to enable member universities to enhance diversity, to share ideas, experiences and expertise. Each member of the Network is a leading university demonstrating international best practice in research and education, based on established academic traditions. The Network includes: Dartmouth College, Durham University, Queen’s University, the University of Otago, Tübingen University, the University of Western Australia, and Uppsala University. The Network takes its name, Matariki, from the Māori name for the group of stars called the Pleiades, which are also known as the seven sisters. Matariki is also the word for the Māori new year, symbolising a new beginning.

Activity based benchmarking project

This Network provides the platform for the Libraries to collaborate on the development of a series of common international performance measures which will provide each of the universities with a benchmark for reviewing and comparing library performance in areas of specific interest.

It is well understood that university libraries need to be working towards methodologies and strategies to show that they are making an impact on the teaching, learning and research endeavours of their university. All are under increasing pressure to show how they perform relative to like institutions in the global community. However, while there is growing interest in
cross-national benchmarks there is little benchmarking that allows reliable international comparisons.

Benchmarking is the process of identifying best practices and learning from others. It has been found that actual improvements following benchmarking arise from considering and looking at processes, tools and techniques rather than simply comparing and reviewing measurements of activity. Benchmarking activities extend networking, build collaborative relationships and mutual understanding between participants, enable better understanding of practice, process or performance and provides insights into how improvements might be made (Jackson 2001). Activity based benchmarking is a methodology in which a selected number of activities, which are either typical or representative of the range of services an institution provides, are analysed and compared with similar activities in other selected institutions.

Why use the Matariki Network? Each member of the Network is amongst the leading places of learning in its respective country while reflecting a modern and international outlook. Each has distinguished traditions in research and each focuses on a rounded education which is research-led. Matariki members encourage an inter-disciplinary approach and support a full subject base across the sciences, social sciences and humanities; all have Medical schools. Each has a mix of postgraduate and undergraduate students with a high residential component, and a significant “town and gown” relationship.

Comparison of performance and process amongst institutions possessing similar characteristics will lead to a better understanding of relative performance in an environment where there is an increasing need to demonstrate value and provide evidence of accountability. Benchmarking amongst the Matariki Network Libraries will set individual institutional performance in an international context and help each identify areas of strength and weakness. Identification of best practices amongst the group will augment quality assurance processes and highlight areas for potential improvement. This data will inform the development of a library assessment capacity maturity model that allows each library to identify an improvement path as described by Wilson (2012). In a climate of competition for local and national resources, sharing on an international level offers great potential for harnessing collaborative activity.

All partners agreed to participate in the project in May 2011. The project is being managed by a team from the University of Otago Library. This paper maps the collaborative development and progress of this up to March 2013.

The collaboration continuum

The collaboration continuum (Zorich, Waibel, & Erway 2008) provides a useful framework to consider approaches and activities used when working together toward a common goal. This framework extends beyond the 3 c’s model of “cooperation, coordination and collaboration” distilled by others (Engstrom & Tinto 2000) (Brown & Keast 2003). It acknowledges the important stages of establishing contact to communicate commonalities. It considers what
occurs after the collaboration, moving towards convergence, where there is potential to transform services and operations. The focus here is not upon the cult of collaboration where collaboration is promoted as a process in and of itself, but as a process outcome, a spin off, a product in the process of working together.

![Collaboration Continuum](image)

Figure 1: The Collaboration continuum.

On this continuum as a project progresses from left to right it becomes more complex. The investment of resources becomes more significant, the risks increase accordingly, while the returns also become greater. Like any business investment collaboration requires considered planning, clear communication and careful relationship management. The reward of working with others outside of traditional boundaries offers great potential for realising innovation beyond what one party can achieve alone.

In this case study the project team are administering the benchmarking exercise and thus far it is progressing through the continuum in a relatively linear fashion. Mapping progress on the continuum provides a useful framework for considering the development of the project. Each institution is participating as resources permit. There may need to be several more iterations of benchmarking activities for the benefits of the project to be fully realised across the Network.

Contact

Prior to making contact with each of the Network Libraries, approval to establish the viability of the project was obtained by the project management team from Otago senior management. Support was sought from the Matariki Network of Universities secretariat, currently the Pro Vice Chancellor International at the University of Otago. A University of Otago Quality improvement grant was obtained to provide seeding funding.

Several considered strategies were employed to promote the project to the Network partners. Email contact was initially made with each of the library executives across the Network to seek support for the project. Included in this email was a proposal document that outlined the projects benefits, its aims, the method and the deliverables. In an effort to mitigate the risk of partners being unable to participate it was suggested in the proposal document that a timeframe be established which would provide flexibility to accommodate the variations in academic
To limit any substantial investment required by each partner it was suggested in the proposal that the exact scope of the project be determined by the partners based on the resources that can be made available. Assurance was provided that Otago would resource the initial setup and administer the project.

The benefits of working towards methodologies and strategies to demonstrate impact found resonance as agreement to participate was forthcoming with all of the partner Libraries nominating a representative to act as project contact.

Cooperation

To open up dialogue and to foster in the shared development of the project a discussion document was circulated. This document covered steps in the establishment of the project. It sought to:

- Develop and confirm the project aim and scope.
- Review and determine an initial project timetable that is realistic for all partners.
- Provide a framework for information gathering that is structured to allow a standardised approach to collating activities and a common understanding of what is to be benchmarked.
- Provide context by defining elements of library activities, institutional policies, cohorts and other facets that will influence how and what is responded to in the surveys.

Feedback and agreement on the issues raised in the document was invited from across the Network.

Coinciding with the release of this document a member of the project management team, the University of Otago University Librarian, undertook visits to four of the seven partner Libraries. Mid 2011 the opportunity arose for him to visit Tübingen and Uppsala and later in the year Queen’s University in Canada and Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. This provided an opportunity to continue discussion about the project and explore commonalities. A presentation on the objectives of the project offered a chance to clarify issues, build relationships, and develop a shared vision. These face to face meetings provided occasions to acquire tacit knowledge to support decisions. For example; he was able to appreciate first-hand the resource commitments some partners were facing and reflect this in the timetabling to allow time for each partner the opportunity to contribute.

Resourcing did not allow for site visits to the remaining two partner Libraries. In one of these instances cooperation was fostered through the use of online video conferencing. The other required a number of email letters. A balance between formal and social dialogue was aimed for. Care was taken with correspondence to rectify any misunderstandings that had developed.
Where communication issues did occur the project management team took ownership of these and sought to clarify these immediately.

All investment made by the partners in providing responses to the discussion document were acknowledged with appreciation. In order to diminish any risk of losing participation in the project no follow up was employed if a partner had elected not to contribute to issues raised in the document. These strategies would continue to be applied as the project progressed. Overall it became clear that there was a need to continue to build dialogue and assign resources towards good communication.

Engagement was fostered by limiting the transactions costs and through keeping it manageable for each partner. It was proposed and agreed that the project should consider existing and emerging practices that support selected service components and identify developing initiatives. The service components were divided into three prime areas: support for learning, support for research, and the Library and the student experience. Each survey cycle would consider in turn an aspect of each service component and a single aspect of that component. Rather than measuring and comparing traditional processes, it was agreed that the project focus on activities that support wider institutional strategic imperatives. The aim here being to provide a better understanding of progress in an environment of increasing need to demonstrate value and provide evidence of successful outcomes.

It was agreed to initially consider support for learning, and specifically, activities and practice for programmes that support the transition of first year students to university life. It was recognised that each partner would be at a different stage of working with certain groups of students across the disciplinary range for which there is an identified need or institutional/funding body priority. Earlier in the project it was considered requesting that all partners report on the same cohort, the first year health sciences. However through the first hand discussions during the site visits it was identified that this would be logistically too difficult. Therefore, it was agreed that each partner identify a specific cohort that they wish to provide data on. This would allow each partner to undertake some internal benchmarking in identifying the most pertinent cohort to report on. This is another example of the value of acquiring tacit knowledge to support decisions.

To ensure a successful outcome for all the partners each was asked to confirm to a timetable that would allow for resources to be allocated. It was agreed to extend this over a nine month period to accommodate the various academic calendars. This timetable may not be what would be expected in a local or national project but it was important to recognise the local academic cycles so that the individual members could allocate resources to the project. The benefit of identifying measures that could translate across an international network outweighed any urgency to deliver. The long term benefits of bringing each of the partners to the project in their own time, for each to realise the benefits from investing resources, being an important focus.
Coordination / Collaboration

As the development of the project progressed a series of tools were employed to support the coordination that would be required in the project. An online collaborative workspace was built as a shared space for the contacts to work together. An information framework was developed to identify a common language. A regular newsletter was produced to share the progress of the project with wider library partners and the stakeholders. These were selected to overcome distance and improve communication as the partners worked towards a common goal.

The coordinating aspects of working together involve the sharing of tasks and decision making, establishing norms of reciprocity, the development of a shared language and interpersonal trust. Some of these aspects advanced across the continuum, from coordinating into collaboration, as the partners started to resolve issues that could not be achieved in isolation and as they began to work together as equal partners.

The release of the online collaborative workspace contributed to the coordination of the project. It was developed using Wordpress, an open source blogging tool and a content management system. This allowed for authenticated access, selected content areas, discussion forums and the sharing of resources. This has been important to the success of the project as it enables information exchange to suit the timeframes and workflows.

Part of this information exchange has included the development of an information framework. The information framework has helped to define and contextualize the terms used to describe the activities reported on in the project. This was structured to allow a standardised approach to collating activities and a common understanding of what is benchmarked.

Each of the partners were asked to contribute to determining the context by defining elements of their activities, institutional policies, cohorts and other facets that will influence how and what they each respond to in the on-going surveys instruments. Following this activity a series of initial terms and definitions were agreed upon and posted to the collaborative workspace. This investment paid off. It became evident that even though English is a first language for five of the seven partners cultural and colloquial variations existed. For example, the term “first year student” became defined as: “a student who is enrolled at the entry level of an undergraduate programme of any university for the first time / first year.” It became important to clarify this as for one partner “first year student” was used to refer to students who are first in family to attend University, whereas, others referred to this cohort as “first generation students”. As the project progresses partners are able to add and modify new terms and definitions and develop a shared language.

Further input was sought from the partners in developing the survey questions. The project management team posted a proposed set of questions to the collaborative workspace for the partners to consider and comment upon. A two month period was allocated for the partners to discuss these within a forum space in the collaborative workspace. It was recognised that if all
the partners share in developing the questions then it will help in identifying measures that mean the same thing to one another. In total nine questions were confirmed. Each question contained a main trunk with stems to elicit more specific information. Examples included:

- Describe the cohort.
  - Include details on size, specific characteristics, and identified learning needs.

- Explain how the library works with the cohort.
  - Briefly outline the history of this relationship.
  - Include details of the other groups in the University who work with this cohort.
  - Highlight the way the library and these other groups work together

- Indicate the current status of the programme that is provided for the cohort.
  - Include details on the progress of the specific programme as it relates to the wider library teaching and learning programme.
  - Highlight any trends of interest, opportunities, and challenges in this area.

A further two month period was allocated for the partners to respond to the questions within the collaborative workspace. In recognising the long term focus of the project this was extended to six month period to allow all of the partners to contribute.

The responses provided a valuable set of data for each Library to review and learn from. Some Libraries elected to share useful information resources. Some of which may contribute to addressing specific needs that were identified by others. A rich array of activity was reported on collecting data to inform practice and measure effectiveness. These range from formal assessment survey processes through to more subjective levels of feedback collected in action. It became evident that at this stage of the project in order to identify effective measures there is a need to learn more detail about assessment processes used by each partner. This could provide the opportunity to map this data across an assessment capacity maturity model to gain a better understanding of what such a model might look like.

Throughout the development period a regular newsletter was produced by the project management team to share progress with the library partners and stakeholders. Like the name of the Network, Matariki, the newsletter was assigned a Māori name, Te Whakatere, meaning navigation. This was selected to reflect the purpose of the benchmarking project. As the partners work together and compare library performance they will be navigating their own courses finding the best way. This newsletter provided an avenue for aspects of the project to be broken down and simplified into smaller concepts. This allowed for developing a shared understanding across the Network. Important features could be highlighted at particular junctures when coordination or cooperation were required. It was identified that it would be important to provide each of the partners a means of building engagement for the project within their own institutions. To foster further engagement and widen the focus contributions were
sought from other partners. Queen University Library provided an item on the Otago University Librarians visit to their Library. Dartmouth College Library provided an item on the development of a new institutional survey assessment tool. Further collaborative stories have been reported focusing on the development of relationships outside of the project. These have included profiling the Durham University Librarian visit to the University of Otago to serve as an international panel member on a quality review, and by highlighting informal meetings that took place between staff from partner Libraries during a Library assessment conference. This has been part of a considered strategy to promote and normalise the idea of working together across the Network; to widen the perceived benefits from taking the risk and investing in working together.

To signify and build upon the investment made by each of the partners in responding to the survey questions a second discussion document was circulated. This document summarised aspects of the survey responses and suggested areas for further consideration. It proposed a roadmap for the next stage. This included arranging a face to face meeting for more in-depth information exchange. This meeting is now confirmed and will be held at Dartmouth College in September 2013. It will allow for the issues raised from considering the first survey data to be discussed in more depth. Further development of a common instrument for use in benchmarking can be shared. Arrangements for progressing to the next stage of the project can be addressed. Combining both work and social activities this meeting has great potential to build relationships and the trust necessary for working together effectively.

This meeting will take place during a wider collaborative venture that has emerged from the partnership, a conference on Research and the Humanities. This conference, a spin off from the process of working together, aims to bring colleagues from the seven Matariki institutions in dialogue with one another about the current state of Humanities-Oriented Research. The gathering has two main purposes: to exchange ideas about current practices and best practices at the respective institution, and to develop an outcome-oriented look towards areas of resource sharing and collaboration.

The project management team recognise that through advancing this face to face meeting this will increase the risk to the projects viability and the on-going participation by all the partner libraries across the Network. Each of the partners is now being asked to invest significantly further, through sending a representative to the meeting, in order to advance the project and extend the partnership. It is hoped though that the benefits of participating are now evident. An infrastructure for sharing information and resources has been established. With considered planning, clear communication and careful relationship management through the project the partners have all contributed to the first survey cycle and have shared in creating a data set that they can all learn from. The reward from sharing in the development of a series of common international performance measures now depends upon harnessing this collaborative activity.
Collaborating at an international level offers this project the benefit of more scope to assess measures than could perhaps be achieved at a local or regional level. It expands the potential to identify best practice and the range of what each partner could learn from one other. It contributes to data on the effectiveness of assessment processes used across each partner that could inform and add value to the development of an assessment capacity maturity model. A maturity model that allows libraries to consider the effectiveness of assessment processes, and offers a development path for libraries to deliver evidence of successful outcomes and to demonstrate value; all though harnessing international collaboration for quality.

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References


