International Collaboration for Quality

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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 will be mapped out. Strategic and practical aspects in developing the project will be considered. I hope this case study will be relevant to others considering, or involved in, international collaborative projects.
The Matariki Network of Universities is an international collaborative venture that has been established to enable members 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.

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. We all are under increasing pressure to show how we perform relative to like institutions in the global community. However, while there is growing interest in cross-national comparisons and collaboration there is little benchmarking activity that allows reliable international comparisons.
Benchmarking

“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.”


So that we are all working to the same definitions, let’s revisit what we mean by benchmarking. 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. That is comparing my statistics and counts with another library.

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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 across other institutions.
Why use the Matariki Network?

- Leading academic institutions
- Strong research traditions and informed teaching
- Inter-disciplinary approach
- All have medical schools
- Strong residential traditions
- Significant “town and gown” relationships

Why use the Matariki Network? There is commonality that would, we hoped, work to our advantage. 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. We also hope these data will inform the development of a library assessment maturity model that allows each library to identify an improvement path.

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 adapted from Zorich, Waibel and Erway provides a useful framework to consider approaches and activities used when working together towards a common goal. And we can use this to reference the development of the Matariki Libraries benchmarking project.

This framework extends beyond the 3 c's model of "cooperation, coordination and collaboration" distilled by others. 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 product from the process of working together.

On this continuum, as a project progresses from left to right, it becomes more complex. The investment of resources becomes more significant and the risks increase accordingly, while at the same time the rewards also can 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 and helps ground the work needed to keep it moving. Each institution is participating as resources permit. Sometime there are long timeframes. It is still very much a work in progress. There may need to be several more iterations of benchmarking activities for the benefits of the project to be fully realised across the Network.
Prior to making contact with each of the Network libraries, approval to establish the project was obtained by the project management team from Otago senior management. Support was sought from the Matariki Network of Universities secretariat, current the Pro Vice Chancellor International at the University of Otago. A University of Otago Quality Improvement grant was obtained to provide seed funding for some of the infrastructure that we knew we would need.

Several strategies were employed to promote the project to the Network partners. Email contact was initially made with each of library executives across the Network to seek sport for the project. This initial contact included defined objectives and a rationale for participating. 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 not being able to participate it was suggested in the proposal document that a timeframe be established which would provided flexibility to accommodate the variations in academic calendars across the Network.

It was recognized up front that there would have to be a broad international approach. To limit any substantial investment required by each partner it was
suggested that the exact scope of the project be determined by the partners based on the resources that could 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 and agreement to participate was forthcoming with all of the partner Libraries nominating a representative to act as project contact within two months of the initial contact.
To open up dialogue and to foster contributions to the shared development of the project, a further 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 would be realistic for all partners
• Provide a framework for information gathering, structured to allow a standardized approach to collating activities and a common understanding of what was to be benchmarked
• Provide context by defining elements of library activities, institutional policies, cohorts and other facets that would influence how and what is addressed in the surveys

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

Coinciding with the release of this document I was able to visit four of the seven partner Libraries. In mid 2011 the opportunity arose for me 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 more closely. A presentation on the objectives of the project offered a chance to clarify issues, build relationships, and develop a shared vision to a wider audience than just my counterparts. These face to face meetings provided occasions to acquire tacit knowledge to support decisions. For example; I was able to appreciate first-hand the resource commitments some partners were facing and ensure that this was reflected back 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. However I had met with Directors from the University of Western Australia at other conferences and cooperation was fostered through the use of online video conferencing. Building links with the UK required a number of email letters. A balance between formal and social dialogue was aimed for. Care was taken with correspondence to rectify as soon as possible any misunderstandings that might develop through unfamiliarity with each others environment and/or language. Where communication issues did occur we 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. We resisted the urge to move on a hard sell as we felt this would have a negative outcome.

These strategies would continue to be applied as the project progressed. Overall we came to realize that there was an ongoing need to continue to build dialogue and assign resources towards communication as a consideration of the project.

Engagement was fostered by limiting resourcing overheads and cost through keeping it manageable for each partner. It was proposed 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 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

“As [you] move from left to right on this continuum, the collaborative endeavor becomes more complex, the investment of effort becomes more significant, and the risks increase accordingly. However, the rewards also become greater, moving from singular, “one-off” projects to programs that can transform the services and functions of an organization.”

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. We knew that each partner would be at a different stage of working with certain groups of students across the disciplinary range for which there would be 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 seen 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.

To ensure a successful outcome for all the partners, each was asked to confirm to a timetable that would allow for resources to be assigned to responding to the survey. In the end it was agreed to extend the timeline 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, was an important focus that we didn't want to lose sight of.
As the development of the project progressed a series of tools were employed to support the coordination required in the project. An online collaborative workspace was built as a shared space for the libraries 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 solved in isolation and as they began to work together as equal partners.
The release of the online collaborative workspace helped the coordination of the project. It was developed using Wordpress the open source blogging tool along with a content management system. This allowed for authenticated access to 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 that suits individual time frames and workflows.

Part of this information exchange has included the development of an information framework that I mentioned earlier. This has helped to define and contextualise the terms used to describe the activities reported on in the project. It was structured to allow a standardized approach to collating activities and a common understanding of what is being benchmarked.

Each of the partners were asked to determine the context by defining elements of their activities, institutional policies, cohorts and other facets that would influence how and what they each respond to in the on-going survey instruments. Following this activity a series of initial terms and definitions were agreed upon and posted to the collaborative workspace.
This investment has 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 cohort" had to become “first year student” which 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 cohort” was used to refer to students who are first in family to attend University, whereas, others referred to this group as “first generation students”. As the project progresses partners are able to add and modify new terms and definitions and develop a shared language and understanding of what we are benchmarking.
Throughout the development period a regular newsletter was produced 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 to navigate. 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 course - finding the best way. This newsletter provided an avenue for aspects of the project to be broken down and simplified into smaller concepts and allowed for developing a shared understanding across the libraries. Important features could be highlighted at particular junctures when coordination or cooperation were required.

We felt 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 all 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 in the US last year. 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 a risk and investing local resources in working together.
Further input was sought from the partners in developing the survey questions. We co-opted a small team of two from the College of Education and 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 to discuss these within a forum space.

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. As you can see from the examples on this slide.

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Survey questions

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

2. 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.
A generous timeframe for the next stage of the initial project continued the trend. Two months were 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 have been identified by others. A rich array of activity was reported on resulting in data to inform practice and help define measures of 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 we each use and the ideal framework that supports (or doesn't) a culture of assessment and performance measurement. 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.
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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 and to make a decision on the next stage of the project. This meeting is now confirmed and will be held at Dartmouth College in September this year. 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 wider benchmarking will be discussed. 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. Dartmouth has proposed, and the members accepted, the development of a conference on Research and the Humanities. Deans, Directors and PVCs as well as University Librarians will look at sourcing initiatives that the libraries are taking in support of Humanities Research, including Digital 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 now 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.

To some extent we are coming up to crunch time: through advancing this face to face meeting we are increasing the risk of questioning the project's viability and the ongoing participation by all the partner libraries. Each of the partners is now being asked to invest further 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 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 we each could learn from one other. It contributes to data on the effectiveness of assessment processes used and that could inform and add value to the development of an assessment capacity maturity model. A maturity model that allows us 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.
From a review/consideration of what works and what doesn’t one might be able to draw “a guide to building library self-assessment capability maturity” which has relevance to the wider academic library environment. This isn't a new concept and borrows heavily from capability maturity models that have been under development for some time. To give a brief synopsis: a five stage model begins as an:

Initial (chaotic, ad hoc, individual heroics) - often we discover we are doomed to repeating low level work because. "Don’t have the time" to document procedures so that the process can become:

Repeatable - the process is at least documented sufficiently such that repeating then can begin to become standard procedures

Defined - the process is defined/confirmed as a standard business process, and decomposed to levels 0, 1 and 2 (the latter being Work Instructions).

Managed - the process is quantitatively managed in accordance with agreed-upon metrics and required outcomes

Optimizing - process management includes deliberate process to incorporate
continuous process improvement and organizational optimization/improvement.
Work has been undertaken by others along these lines. Wilson presented at the ARL conference on Library Assessment last year, a maturity model related to quality.

It's a bit hard to read but from you can see some examples of planning and assessment that she has taken and mapped to the five stage model. We will be considering how we can take this work and building on the Matariki benchmarking activities, using our own data and resources, we'd hope to be able to map out an assessment and performance measurement capability maturity model.

We hope this work will inform each of the libraries with examples and practices that we will each be able to adopt and embed. The project to date has helped each of us understand the environmental factors of one another, which should help support easy adoption of each others tools and initiatives.

We also hope this will be able to be shared by the wider library community through fora such as IATUL.
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References


