

Internationalisation of universities – an Austrian-German benchmarking project.

A participant's account of her experiences

I was happy to take up HIS' suggestion to talk about the 2009 benchmarking project in the form of a very subjective report:

So I will address the following points in my presentation:

1. **Key points in the benchmarking project**
2. **My reasons for taking part in the benchmarking project**
3. **My experiences in the project**
4. **Findings from the project relevant to daily work**
5. **Consequences for my own organisation**
6. **Limits to the benchmarking procedure / restrictions**

Point 1: Key points in the benchmarking project

I would like to briefly set out the project's key themes and organisational aspects for orientation:

Within the scope of five workshops – following a kick-off event at the end of 2008 – the following topics were discussed and analysed with the help of HIS in 2009:

- Operationalisation of internationalisation strategies
- Support for students from other countries
- Internationalisation and locations near borders
- Elimination of obstacles to students' mobility
- Assessment and discussion of the statistical performance data collected for the international offices in a final workshop

The following universities actively participated in this project:

Technical University Dresden with Marion Helemann, Saarland University with Stefan Lauterbach, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology with Achim Niessen, University of Graz with Sabine Pendl, Europa University Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder with Petra Weber and me representing The University of Vienna. The series of workshops was accompanied by Thomas Schroeder and Ilka Sehl of HIS.

The project participants met almost every month during the first six months of 2009 – either here in Hannover or in one of the cities of the participating universities. You could say that we became acquainted with the other universities and their organisations not only on paper but also in person.

It was agreed at the end of the project that the heads of the participating international offices would within the scope of an anthology write papers on the results gained from the benchmarking procedure and that these papers would be included in a volume to be initiated and published by HIS in June 2010.

Point 2: My reasons for taking part in the benchmarking project

Many discussions, many analyses, many trips and much research at home accompanied the process – what would bring a head of an international office already burdened with the workload of many operational agendas to subject herself to such a process? Or, in other words, why would a university's management make resources available to this end?

I can only answer this question for myself: when I arrived at Vienna University in 2008, I came from a research-management background. The department that I took over was the result of a merger of the research-service department, which helped researchers among other things with questions regarding the funding for the next generation of academics, and the international relationship department whose task it was to deal with student mobility, academic mobility and international courses of study.

I was asked at the initial hearing to present an implementation concept for this service unit to the rector at the time, Prof. Georg Winckler. And so it was that during my extensive research into the topic of "international" activities, I discovered the study by Brandenburg and Federkiel. They measure internationality and internationalisation in the higher education sector by using indicators and key figures. Their very extensive presentation of key internationalisation figures caused me to suggest to the rector's office that a comprehensive university internationalisation strategy should be drawn up and that – in a second stage – key internationalisation figures to measure its implementation should be introduced.

So the inquiry from HIS arrived on my desk just at the right time. Prof. Arthur Mettinger the vice rector for "Educational Program Development and Internationalisation at the time", actively supported my efforts in this area for the reason that they would also increase our know-how in this

field of work and – with a new director of its international office – the work would help determine the state of Vienna University's internationalisation activities.

On the other hand, I think that my know-how in the field of key-figure development and evaluation procedures that I had already been able to build up in research management was also useful to the benchmarking project.

All universities claim that they are internationally oriented and confirm that they are willing to internationalise further. So it could be said that it's just a matter of course within a university's activities – but that is exactly what makes it so dangerous. It has always been taken for granted, this field of work and how efficiently and effectively it was being carried out was never actually scrutinised. All that ever happened was talk and little colourful flags on the respective facilities' websites .

And that's why the HIS' suggestion for the benchmarking procedure came at such a good time: it presented an opportunity to look at the individual product segments, to shine a light on things that had for decades never been questioned, to compare the effort being put in and thus create the basis for change within the organisation... but more of that later.

Today – a few years down the line – Vienna University's internationalisation strategy has long since been implemented, the new vice rector –responsible for “Human resources development and international relations” – must each year submit an internationalisation report, along with key figures to the university council, that is the university's supervisory board, and this report is then also sent to all our international partner universities. I would be happy to provide copies from recent years.

In contrast to the situation in Germany, not too many resources are invested in Austrian universities' internationalisation activities. In the paper I prepared at the conclusion of the benchmarking project, I attempted to utilise the experiences gained from this German-Austrian procedure in a comparison of countries and based this comparison on work being carried out by the foreign grant institutes of the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD, which is the German Academic Exchange Service) and the Österreichischer Akademischer Austauschdienst (OeAD, which is the Austrian Academic Exchange Service).

It was my aim to place the organisational unit that I headed within the context of other international offices and to do so beyond the borders of Austria.

Motivation increased after the first workshop not least because the participants hit it off right from the start. A good mix of heads from different types of international offices, with different levels of

international experience and from other areas stimulated the discussion and made it productive. Finding out about the German internationalisation system meant that I was able to take many ideas back to my own university. I think that this also applied to my German colleagues: through my colleague from Graz and me, they got to know the system in place at and are known as autonomous universities in Austria that are controlled centrally, in other words not by the federal states. Their organisational units conclude target agreements within the universities and performance agreements with the Federal Ministry of Science and Research. (The 2002/2003 University Act resulted in a radical paradigm shift for Austrian universities that changed them from being departments subordinate to the responsible ministry into research and education facilities financed by public funds. Tuition fees totalling around 360 euros per semester are only charged to students from certain non-EU countries and from students who remain with the university longer than a certain amount of time. The universities have at their disposal three-year budgets that are negotiated from the outset within the scope of performance agreements. The new autonomy that Austrian universities now enjoy has among other things led to staff being employed directly by universities instead of by the responsible ministry.)

Point 3: My experiences in the project

Asked about my experiences in this benchmarking project, I first think of the fact that without a doubt it was a lot of work. The standardisation process that came before the results could easily be described as quite arduous, but it was also interesting to see how difficult it was for the heads of the six international offices to find a common language: the efforts by the participants, who all came from the German-language region, to define the terminology were at times really difficult to sit through. And once the country-specific peculiarities had been eliminated, university-specific ones appeared.

It was also beneficial to see how attempts were made to preserve the unique nature of the procedures and organisation before a common terminology and a common understanding of the processes was arrived at. This manner of proceeding was very time-consuming but essential to participation in such a process.

The joint development of topic groups was very important to making sure that all participants took an active part: we relatively quickly agreed what the important topics in the “international” field were – some wanted to emphasise operational problems more, while others wanted to focus more on strategic questions. This was also due to the respective localisation of the international offices within their university organisations.

It was my personal impression that competitive aspects happily played a minor role in the benchmarking work. Strengths and weaknesses within the participants' own organisations were discussed relatively openly – here, too, the cross-border work was advantageous because participants weren't competing directly with each other for budget shares.

The learning effect in the discussion rounds was therefore enormous, we learnt both from the mistakes that colleagues had made and from the successes that they had achieved.

However, as the project progressed, we became increasingly aware that it was difficult to transfer best practices to other organisations. The time-consuming discussion process, however, enabled us to use questions to identify those areas where transfers could be possible.

The international officers' ability to communicate is necessarily great: those who communicate throughout the world are naturally also able to communicate with colleagues from other universities. It was important, however, to create a common theme to run through this universe of relations, facts and measures – and this difficult task was achieved through the skilful and thoughtful moderation of the HIS staff.

Without the thoughtful accompaniment of the project by HIS, I think its output would have been modest. Usually, we are so caught up with our own areas of work that we are unable to see the overall picture. Moderation wasn't only important in regard to tightening the sometimes excessive discussions between highly dedicated heads but also in regard to defining a theoretical framework for the project. The HIS staff were therefore not only mediators but also motivators. The risk of falling into detailed discussions about operational aspects was thus reduced.

The practising of work with quantitative procedures was also very helpful for analysing such organisations as universities which did not really know how to employ them, particularly in the international field. It was, however, important to find a practicable route between qualitative and quantitative procedures. The combination utilised for this benchmarking project was new to me. Over recent years, Austria had carried out many quantitative measurements and presented the results in knowledge reports – these are annual university reports – but it hadn't focused so much on qualitative comparisons. ("Knowledge reports are aimed at providing a comprehensive view, assessment and communication of intangible assets and performance processes at the specific universities and their effects. They are to be used as the qualitative and quantitative basis for the creation of performance agreements and for pursuing the implementation of targets and projects set out in performance agreements." (Quote from: *Federal Law Gazette for the Republic of Austria, 7 July 2010 / 216. Knowledge report ordinance issued by the Federal Ministry of Science and Research*

(*Wissensbilanz-Verordnung 2010 – WBV 2010*)).) The benchmarking project's informative value was in any event enhanced through the combination of qualitative and quantitative processes.

It was especially during this project that I particularly noticed how important it was to be accompanied by people from the outside because this allowed the results achieved to be made available to a broader range of experts.

The input from the experience gained with other benchmarking processes was also very helpful.

This external accompaniment, which ranged from the organisation of workshops, methods and documentation to the appraisal of the results, was without a doubt an integral part of the procedure:

Data analysis and interpretation by HIS were particularly necessary because its outside view enhanced the results. Internationalists are not collectors of hard facts – this is something I would like to point out self-critically – that's why support from experts was essential.

Point 4: Findings relevant to daily work

As already mentioned, I was particularly interested at the beginning of my work in the international office in gaining an insight into where the organisation unit saw itself in regard to its performance. The analysis of the amount of work that would be generated by specific tasks was particularly important to me.

Comparisons with other, particularly with "younger" international offices, meant that it became possible to question things that had become established over time and that had been presented as being unchangeable.

The project helped me to quickly become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of our system. Omissions in the range of tasks also became visible. This may be demonstrated on the basis of a concrete example: services for students from other countries were outsourced to a great extent as a result of budgetary constraints. The qualitative analysis during the benchmarking project showed that this method largely failed to contribute to the fulfilment of objectives. And just analysing the key figures for student mobility would not have revealed this shortcoming. It was only the qualitative procedure – the precise comparison of performance packages in the benchmarking participants' individual task ranges – that made it possible to identify weak points.

I have used this example because it also demonstrates that the whole subject area of "student mobility" constitutes the core of a university's internationalisation efforts. Two workshops were –

appropriately – dedicated to this topic. The difficulties and obstacles encountered in carrying out this core task were discussed many times. It was here that we could all learn lots from each other because many different approaches were employed in this area. Vienna University, which alone serves one quarter of all Erasmus students in Austria and which is strong in the quantitative field, benefited particularly from so-called bench-learning in the qualitative field. We saw with some envy how smaller universities were much more dedicated (and were in the position of being able to be so) in the provision of services to international students. The range of services is necessarily smaller when such a large number of mobile students need to be managed as is the case at Vienna University. It was – and is – a challenge, however, to transfer successful measures implemented at smaller and internationally very active universities to larger facilities.

For me bench-learning also took place in the area of strategy: some participating universities had progressed much further in the definition of their internationalisation strategies than we had at the time – and had even taken a lead in the implementation of their strategies.

The different approaches taken at the individual universities to steer internationalisation also taught us a lot. What university favoured decentral localisation, what university employed a central model of action, for instance.

The most visible learning effect for me was related to the factors that had a bearing on successful internationalisation. Which is not least why I focused on this area in the article I wrote for the publication produced on conclusion of the process and called it, “Analyse von Einflussgrößen auf die Durchführung von Internationalisierungsaktivitäten einer Universität mit Hilfe eines deutsch-österreichischen Benchmarking-Verfahrens” (“Analysis of factors affecting the execution of university internationalisation activities with the aid of a German-Austrian benchmarking procedure”).

The effects that legal framework conditions, integration of the international field into the organisation and involvement of the management (i.e. vice president/president of international matters), to name but a few factors, had on the performances achieved in this area of work became apparent to me.

Even such European programmes as Erasmus are handled differently in the various member states, to mention just one example. Scholarship resources are handled centrally through a national agency in Austria while in Germany they are managed locally through the individual universities.

Interestingly, the participants in the different countries were very satisfied with the solutions specific to their countries. The German group was happy with the fact that large amounts of funding were being transferred to the international departments’ accounts while the Austrian group thought that

the fact that they had to manage one less administrative task, in other words, finances, was quite attractive.

Here, this project showed how sustainable framework conditions for grants from external sources were important to determining performances at the individual universities and how they saw themselves. Major differences in the countries of those participating in the benchmarking project became apparent here, to put it mildly. The great importance of third-party funding initiatives – not only at European level but also at national levels – is demonstrated by, among other things, the DAAD’s initiatives designed to improve how institutes manage the international work carried out at universities. (Example given: the Welcome Service ideas competition.)

Not only was it helpful to acquire an impression of the framework conditions, it was also very useful to gain a self-critical insight into one’s own institute. On the one hand, this made it easier to get valuable suggestions for focusing on the required tasks. In other words: what is really the core task of an international office, what is just a fad? It became very clear how differently resources were distributed and employed. It was surprising how some resource consumers that had grown over time became clear and how understaffed some very important projects in the international departments were.

And I don’t want to conceal one concluding finding from my audience: benchmarking processes do not necessarily lead to wild activism generated from the results mentioned earlier – a certain amount of acceptance towards change also starts to take place within the organisation. How many different organisational varieties are to be found in the universities, how heterogeneous are these structures? It became apparent that it is possible to achieve impressive results in the handling of international programmes using quite different organisational methods. There is no single overall model, there are many different routes, sometimes a confusing number of them, to choose from.

Point 5: Consequences for my own organisation

The following consequences were drawn from the benchmarking project for my own area of responsibility:

A survey of assets that was carried out during the benchmarking project resulted in personnel resources (full-time equivalents) within the international office being reassigned. The focus was shifted from the field of academic mobility to student mobility. The discussions and appraisals showed that compared with other universities there was a need to catch up where the provision of services to mobility students was concerned.

In spite of the serious effects resulting from the switch to the bachelor/master architecture, efficiencies have increased – both quantitatively and qualitatively – in the area of student mobility.

The outsourced services were insofar as possible brought closer to our own organisational structure.

E.g. the Erasmus Student Network's buddy system were provided with office space within the international office.

We lobbied for the International Service to provide greater support for Austrian universities using the DAAD model. Partial success has been achieved in marketing in other countries but not with the OeAD's third-party resource activities. The international officers have repeatedly drawn particular attention to the reduced spectrum of international tasks at the Austrian funding facility.

The key internationalisation figures for Vienna University were extended after the key-figure set within the benchmarking project was drawn up. Key internationalisation figures have been collected at Vienna University and – as mentioned above – published in an internationalisation report for the last four years.

	Knowledge report	Benchmarking process	Key figures of the University of Vienna
I: Incomings	<p>Number of proper students with participation in international mobility programmes, incoming</p> <p>Number of incoming academic / scientific / artistic personnel. Total number within the university year</p>	<p>1: Number of annual incomings</p> <p>2: Number of universities in other countries sending incomings</p>	<p>Incoming Erasmus students</p> <p>Non-EU student exchange programmes, incoming students</p> <p>Partner universities for Erasmus student mobility</p>
II: Outgoings	<p>Number of proper students with participation in international mobility programmes, outgoing</p> <p>Number of academic / scientific / artistic personnel with a minimum five-day stay in other countries (outgoing)</p>	<p>3: Number of annual outgoings</p> <p>4: Number of annual applications for a limited stay</p> <p>5: Number of available university places</p> <p>6: Number of universities in other countries with which mobility contracts exist for outgoings</p> <p>7: Number of universities in other countries to which the AAA (actively) sends students</p> <p>8: Number of participants in teaching-staff mobilities carried out each year</p>	<p>Outgoing Erasmus students</p> <p>Non-EU student exchange programmes, outgoing students</p> <p>Partner universities for Erasmus student mobility</p>
III: University partnerships	<p>Number of partner institutions / companies incorporated into the cooperation contracts</p>	<p>9: Number of cooperation contracts (university level)</p> <p>10: Number of Erasmus contracts (faculty level)</p>	<p>Partner universities as ranked in the QS World University Ranking</p> <p>University partnerships outside Europe</p>
IV: Overall	<p>Number of students</p> <p>Proper students actively taking part in exams</p> <p>Number of students without Austrian BA, MA or diploma admitted to graduate / Ph.D. programmes</p>	<p>11: Total number of enrolled / approved students</p> <p>12: Amount of third-party resources managed</p> <p>13: Fixed number of opening times</p> <p>14: Academic personnel with work contracts</p>	<p>Non-Austrian students</p> <p>Total amount of third party funding for internationally funded research projects</p> <p>Number of non-Austrians on the</p>

			academic staff Number of academic staff receiving third-party funding, by place of origin Number of appointments from other countries
V: Support for students from other countries		15: Participants in socio-cultural events 16: Personnel available to provide support	
VI: Academic success	Number of university graduations with subsidised stays in other countries during university studies	17: Number of graduates (basic number)	Graduates with stays in other countries during their studies
VII: Joint studies (joint / double degree)	Number of international joint degree / double degree programmes	18: Number of programmes with double or multiple graduations 19: Number of enrolled / approved students	

Remarks about the table:

The numbers processed in the benchmarking project are related more to the performance of the international offices while the Vienna University's international report focuses more on the university's performance as a whole. As Sabine Pendl mentions in her paper in the publication on the benchmarking project, the key figures in the knowledge report hardly allow any statements to be made about the performances achieved by the international offices. By the way, Vienna University monitors international research activities more than other universities.

As a result of the discussion about the protagonists active in the field of internationalisation, a survey was carried out with the aim of achieving clarity about the structures at the faculties – which possess very heterogeneous structures – in such a large organisation as Vienna University (9,400 staff, of which 6,700 are academics, and 91,000 students).

Following a phase within the Austrian university system that was dedicated solely to performance monitoring using the key figures from the knowledge reports, qualitative aspects, particularly the customer principle, are now being afforded greater attention.

Standardised surveys of international customers are also to be carried out at Vienna University from 2013. Suggestions from the benchmarking project are to be taken up here.

Point 6: Limiting remarks and limits to the benchmarking procedure:

As stimulating and informative as the project was, the time required, particularly for cross-border procedures, exceeds the capacities that a university short of resources is able to make available. A continuous process, in other words, the annual recording of key performance figures, would be useful and would have considerably improved the project's output. But a time reservoir of this size can only constitute the exception in the everyday work of a departmental head. Even if the repeated recording of figures would be useful, it would still be necessary to continuously adapt the system not least as a result of the people filling the posts of university directors changing.

A further constraint must also be mentioned: because of the highly heterogeneous nature, it was not possible to compare some work packages and processes and cast them in key figures. The different legal rules and regulations also made conclusive comparisons difficult. It was in some cases also difficult to assess resources, in particular in regard to establishing the costs for student assistants and temporary staff, due to the fact that the differences between countries were just too great to allow reliable comparisons to be drawn.

The hope of being able to encourage national players to improve international aspects of their work portfolios has remained unfulfilled.

Résumé

I thought that the project was very informative and very much worth the effort. Particularly as the new head of an international office, I think that the bench-learning process was very valuable for me. My horizon was considerably broadened, particularly by the other project members who performed so well on the international stage. The assessment of how "my" organisational unit stood compared with other universities was in all events worth the effort.

The initiative primarily came from the bottom up, from the heads of the international offices and not so much from the management of the universities.

The suggestions for improvements to individual product areas were taken up and have largely been implemented. Undesirable developments may be prevented by reflecting in this way on habits and those things that have become established over time.

And without the skilful accompaniment by the HIS staff, this project would probably have failed or it would have at least not produced the results that it did.

Thank you for your attention.