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Raising quality and achievement

A college guide to benchmarking

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Contents

1. Introduction

The ongoing emphasis on meeting customer and stakeholder needs in education means that colleges continuously have to improve the level of service provided. This continuous improvement has been emphasised by Government policy and by a range of Government papers including the White Paper, *Learning to succeed: a new framework for post-16 learning* (1999). As a result college managers need to use the full range of tools available to them to keep pace with ever changing requirements.

At FEDA, the *Raising quality and achievement* (RQA) programme has been set up to facilitate and support this work. One of the strands of the programme – benchmarking and information – focuses on benchmarking as a method of raising quality and achievement across colleges.

Benchmarking is becoming more widely used across all sectors. It has been used for some time in the commercial sector and is now considered a valuable management tool in further education. This guide is an introduction to the principles and practices of benchmarking for colleges.

Subjects that have additional information are italicised in the main body of the text. This additional information is given towards the end of the guide.

So what is benchmarking? …

2. Benchmarking

Benchmarking is a way to avoid reinventing the wheel, to make the most of other people's expertise. It has been described as 'the art of stealing shamelessly'.

What is benchmarking?

Benchmarking is a systematic method of improvement that utilises others' good practice to improve your own processes. It can be used as a way of improving any process from ordering paperclips to recruiting staff.

Benchmarking is a method of identifying what must be improved in an organisation, finding ways of making those improvements and then implementing the improvements. It requires an organisation to fully understand its processes and its customers' and stakeholders' needs. From that point it is possible to identify gaps between needs and performance. Once an organisation knows what to improve it can use the knowledge and experience of the organisations it is benchmarking with – its benchmarking partners – to identify better ways of working.

Benchmarking partnerships are a two-way learning experience. You will learn from your partners and they, hopefully, will learn from you. Benchmarking can be:

- **Internal:** learning from other departments within your organisation, e.g. a regional office learning from a central department.

- **Sector specific:** learning from organisations that are in a similar area of work to you, e.g. a general FE college learning from a sixth-form college.
- **Generic:** learning from organisations that may operate in a totally different area, e.g. a college learning from a travel organisation.

What benchmarking isn't

Benchmarking is not **just** about:

- **Comparing standards.** Service standards, retention and achievement levels and satisfaction should be compared in order to provide a reference point to assess relevant performance but measurement in itself will not improve performance
- **Taking part in a survey**
- **League tables of performance.** The benchmark statistics produced by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) on retention and achievement will be familiar to many college staff and are of considerable use when identifying areas to be benchmarked
- **Re-engineering your processes.**

Benchmarking is more than comparing standards and performance; it is not benchmarking unless that comparison leads to improvement.

Although benchmarking does involve looking at your own processes it also involves learning from others; from their experiences, their improvements and their mistakes. However, it is not an exercise in industrial tourism. Other organisation's processes are often interesting but the examination of those processes should have a purpose.

Industrial tourism: visiting new places, meeting interesting people and coming home with attractive but impractical souvenirs.

3. The benchmarking process

What do you need before benchmarking?

There are four vital requirements that must be in place before starting a benchmarking project. These are:

- **Strong commitment from senior management to act on the findings of the project.** Identify a suitable champion at senior level. This person should be a key manager who can make sure that benchmarking projects reflect college-wide strategy and planning, and who can make sure that there are adequate resources for the work.

- **Support for the staff taking part in the project, including training and resources.** Training in quality tools is particularly useful. Examples include brainstorming, *flowcharting*, cause and effect diagrams and *Pareto analysis*. A benchmarking coordinator should be appointed to liaise with the benchmarking champion and to record the results of benchmarking projects across the college. This person can minimise duplication of effort by having access to all available resources and ensuring that 'paralysis by analysis' does not develop as a result of over-enthusiasm. The coordinator needs to be given updates on benchmarking projects that are taking place throughout the college, including resultant improvements to processes.

A **benchmarking project** cannot succeed without genuine management commitment to follow it through.

- **Authorisation for staff:** to develop, pilot and implement new practices where appropriate.
- **Agreed time from their normal duties for those staff taking part.** Ensure that there are arrangements in place to cover staff when they are working on the project.

Although all of these requirements are important the first is essential. If you are not convinced that you have management support then the first task will be to secure it. Indeed, if benchmarking is to become an integrated part of the management and improvement process, it will need to be coordinated at a strategic level.

To ensure that there is not a duplication of effort and that benchmarking projects reflect the corporate goals of the college, it is often advantageous to appoint either a benchmarking steering team or to assign responsibility for overseeing benchmarking to a senior manager.

What to benchmark

Best practice benchmarking is a process-based improvement method. Before deciding to benchmark sizeable chunks of your processes, you need to consider the:

- Resources available to you
- Experience of staff involved
- Size of the problem (if known)
- Importance of the process.

It is important to be focused when deciding what to benchmark. One of the most common reasons for failure in a benchmarking project is that the subject area is too wide and nebulous. Once people realise the benefits of benchmarking it is easy to become enthusiastic and to over-stretch. For example a common area identified for benchmarking is communication. This issue, seemingly raised by every staff survey ever conducted, is so large that few organisations really understand how it works. As a result, any attempts to improve it through benchmarking tend to be unsuccessful. It would be far better to concentrate on a more manageable subsection of the area, for example, the way in which an organisation gets feedback from staff.

Always identify the critical success factors in the overall service you provide and establish how well you deliver them. The questions you need to ask your customers, both internal and external, are:

- What are the most important aspects of the service?
- What do you need from the service?
- How well do we meet your needs?
- What works well about the service?
- What doesn't work well?

Organisational priorities must obviously be taken into consideration when deciding what areas to benchmark. There is little point using scarce resources on a benchmarking project to improve a process that is not key to the college. However, it might be worth considering a slightly less important but more manageable area for your first benchmarking project. This will make it easier for staff to use what might initially be an unfamiliar management tool.

Resources available to you

One useful tool to use when deciding what to benchmark is *Pareto analysis*. The theory behind Pareto analysis is that 80% of problems result from 20% of causes. The Pareto method allows you to analyse the processes that cause your customers problems and then focus on ways of improving those processes that make the biggest difference to service delivery.

Staff satisfaction surveys and staff suggestion schemes can also give you an indication of what processes are causing problems for your internal customers.

Self-assessment can give you a good starting point to identify areas to be addressed, as can inspection reports. For a more process-driven approach it is a good idea to use a holistic assessment tool such as *Probe* or the *EFQM Excellence Model*.

Process owner

The purpose of benchmarking is to improve processes. This will inevitably involve implementing change so it is essential to involve the process owner at the very beginning of the benchmarking project. The process owner will usually be a manager. For example, if you are looking at the admissions procedure, the process owner might be the admissions manager or the head of student services.

The more focused you are about the **scope** of the project the more likely you are to succeed.

Scope

Once you have chosen the project area, you need to be clear about the scope. It is easy for the scope to become a wish list to solve every problem that exists within the college. However, the more focused you are about the scope of the project, the more likely you are to succeed. Make sure that you are clear about the boundaries of the process you are looking at; where they start and where they finish.

Put the scope in writing before you decide who will be included on the benchmarking project team. It can always be revised at a later date.

Who to involve

The new perspectives given by staff at different levels can greatly enhance process knowledge and improve the effectiveness of benchmarking projects. Use the process owner to help identify the right people for the project. The benchmarking team should ideally represent front line service delivery and process managers, but avoid making the team too large as the advantages of breadth of knowledge will be countered by the detrimental effect of project management by committee. Aim for four to six people, though small teams of two or three can be successful, provided that other members of staff can be consulted if necessary.

Lack of project work experience should not be seen as an obstacle to taking part. Be willing to provide training for team members to ensure that they can fully contribute to the project. Basic training in quality tools and problem solving should be available to anyone who needs it.

For the team to work effectively, front line staff should feel confident enough to express their opinions in front of other team members. Keep in mind that staff can be reticent of speaking out in front of managers when using brainstorming. Always make sure that the confidentiality of the session is agreed before starting, and avoid letting managers facilitate the brainstorming.

Understanding the existing process

Before using benchmarking to learn from other peoples' systems you must first understand your own processes. Some colleges will have well documented processes but even if your college has written procedures, it is worth *flowcharting* the process being benchmarked. If you do not have a written procedure it is vital to flowchart the process.

Flowcharting identifies each stage in a process, the links between each stage and the inputs and outputs of each stage. As such, it is an excellent way for a team to learn about a process and to understand its strengths and weaknesses. The graphic representation can often highlight issues that staff were not aware of before.

The best way to develop a flowchart is to get the people who are actually involved in the process to construct it. Assemble a cross section of staff involved in the process, supported by a facilitator who is not involved in the process in any way. This gives the facilitator the freedom to ask the 'idiot' questions that nobody else can ask such as 'why do this?' 'who is responsible?' and 'what is this for?'.

Initial flowchart diagrams should, whenever possible, be produced on wipe boards or by using sticky notes, as there will inevitably be a number of revisions as staff realise that they have missed stages of the process out.

Help with initial flowcharting is available from FEDA's RQA project.

Process gaps

Once you have mapped the process, the next stage is to find out whether it meets the needs of the process customers. These customers might be staff, students or external agencies. A number of feedback mechanisms may well already be available to you: student and staff satisfaction surveys, suggestion schemes, complaints and staff meetings.

There are also usually a number of performance indicators that you can use. The following offer some suggested starting points:

- Quality performance measures: complaint levels, achievement rates and retention rates.
- Financial performance measures: staff costs and resource costs.
- Time-based measures: response times for information and the queue time for enrolment.

It is surprising how much information can be obtained from basic analysis. Sometimes a simple cross-referencing of complaints against the flowchart will immediately identify process gaps that are causing major problems. The critical gaps should form the basis of the benchmarking project. This does not mean that other areas should be excluded, but if these critical gaps are not addressed the process will continue to fail even if it is improved in other ways.

What information do you need?

By this stage you should have a good understanding of the process and where its shortfalls are. The next stage is to agree what information you need:

- Call a meeting of the benchmarking team to confirm the gaps identified and to agree the information you need to obtain.
- Be concise. It is easy to be swamped with too much information and to fall into the trap of 'paralysis by analysis'.
- Draft out a provisional list of questions that you would want to ask a benchmarking partner.

Questionnaire

The following list of questions can be applied to most process benchmarking projects and to most organisations seeking the views of a benchmarking partner, regardless of their sector. It might help to use it as a template for your own questionnaire.

- What is your process?
- Is there a documented description or flowchart of the process?
- What process measurements do you use?
- What are the current measurement results?
- What aspects of the process work well?
- What are the problems you have with the process?
- What improvements have you made to the process?
- Is there any other information you feel might be helpful to us?

As with all questionnaires, it is always a good idea to pilot it before sending it to a benchmarking partner. Show the questionnaire to staff from within and outside of the process and, if possible, outside of your college. This will help to ensure that you have included requests for all the information you are likely to need and to remove any jargon. Ask people who are looking at the questionnaire to answer the questions, even if the answers give simulated information, to make sure you can analyse likely responses.

Who to benchmark

The next step is to find a benchmarking partner. It is important to identify a benchmarking partner who will be able to give you information that will help you to improve your processes rather than information that is just interesting to those who are taking part. The partner chosen does not have to be the best at everything in the sector; aim for one who is best at the process being benchmarked.

The choice of partner is key to the success of the benchmarking project. It is not necessary to use a college that is very similar to you; it is not always even necessary to use an educational establishment. Although a college of comparable size and student intake is more likely to understand the problems and constraints that you experience, there may be problems around competition and confidentiality.

There are many examples of organisations successfully using benchmarking projects to improve processes by identifying partners from outside their sector – a major computer manufacturer with a cosmetics company or a housing organisation with a national airline. It is probably better, however, to begin with an organisation in the same sector until you gain some benchmarking experience.

Before deciding on a benchmarking partner, consider the following:

- Is there a potential internal partner in another department or on another site?
- Is there a similar process that is being better applied in another college?
- Is the process education specific or more generic?
- Is the process a sensitive one?
- Is the project likely to involve financially sensitive information?

There are a number of resources available to you to help you identify a potential partner: local support groups, national and local benchmarking clubs and the *FEDA benchmarking database*. Draw up a list of potential partners and decide as a group the order in which they will be approached.

First contact

Benchmarking means many things to many people, so when you first contact your potential partner, try to find a named person who is likely to have a similar understanding of the benchmarking process to yourself. Quality managers can often put you in touch with the right person even if they will not be the main contact for the project. They can also help by explaining the proposed process to their colleagues so that you do not have to educate at the same time as attempting to get agreement for the project to go ahead.

If possible, speak to the contact person first and then send a letter explaining the scope of the project and the benefits to both parties. Make it clear that you see benchmarking as a partnership project and that, as such, there will be an exchange rather than a one-way flow of information.

It is often helpful to include a summary of the information that you will be seeking from them. This will give their organisation a better idea of the best person for you to work with and will also prevent the possible embarrassment of you having requests for information refused on the day of the visit.

Do not be deterred if you have to approach a number of organisations before finding one that agrees to work with you.

Before the visit

Once you have agreed to proceed it is important that you make sure both parties understand the scope and restrictions of the project. Send a *code of conduct* agreement to the partner organisation. Include a copy of the finalised questions that you will be asking, a list of any materials that you want to share and a copy of your flowchart.

The best way to learn about how a process works is to talk to the people directly involved in it. Ask the partner organisation if you can pre-book meetings with relevant staff during your visit.

The **best way to learn about how a process works** is to talk to the people directly involved in it.

The benchmarking team should meet to finalise who is taking part in the visit and the responsibilities of each person attending. Take into account the process knowledge base of the visiting members of the team whilst avoiding swamping the partner organisation with visitors. Make sure that there are sufficient copies of all documents required for the visit.

During the visit

There are some basic rules that should be observed when conducting a benchmarking visit. They are based on the professional courtesy that you would extend to any cross-departmental or cross-organisational meeting.

- Be professional, honest, courteous and punctual.
- Introduce all attendees and explain why they are present.
- Stick to the agenda.
- Avoid using jargon.
- Be sure that neither party is sharing confidential information unless prior approval has been obtained.
- Share information about your own process, and, if asked, consider sharing study results.
- Offer to facilitate a future visit to your college.
- Conclude meetings and visits on time.
- Thank your benchmarking partner for sharing their process.

Approach the visit in a systematic manner. Don't feel uncomfortable about asking the same question a number of times to different people within the organisation. Sometimes it can take a few different versions of the answer before you get the whole story. Be open-minded and be prepared to be surprised.

Collating and analysing the information

Arrange a meeting of the entire benchmarking team as soon as possible after the visit has taken place. This meeting is to share all of the information gathered and is particularly important if the team splits into groups during the visit to meet with different people.

At the meeting decide whether any additional information is required and how to obtain it. If necessary assign one person to collate all information.

The team needs to identify whether the benchmarking partner is in reality producing better results and if so how. Wholesale transfer of another organisation's processes rarely works. What is important is to identify the aspects that enable the good results, adapt them and then adopt them. Ask yourselves the following questions:

- What performance measures can we utilise?
- Are they comparable to the partner organisation's performance indicators? Remember that different organisations measure results in different ways.
- What is the gap between our performance and their performance?
- If their results are better, then how much better?
- What aspect of the process is producing these results?
- Do their process costs justify the improvement?
- What aspects of the process can we adapt?
- How can we adopt the changes?

If the team decides that the general results are not greatly better than their own results, they should then look at whether there are aspects of the partner's process that do work better.

The way forward

Once all the information is collected, the team needs to devise a way of translating the learning into process improvements. It is at this stage that the advantages of a balanced team become most apparent.

Be creative when looking at how best to improve the processes; use brainstorming as a way of identifying solutions and involve all of the team in the decision-making. The project manager will need to consider whether additional skills are required to support the planning, development and management of the improvements and process of implementation.

Make a timetabled plan for implementation and ensure that there are sufficient resources available to implement it.

Use the **benchmarking champion** to ensure that additional resources are in place and to ensure continued senior management support.

Making changes

Change, even change for the better, is often met with resistance. Before attempting to implement changes identify any barriers to change that may exist. It is always best to overcome these barriers before new processes are implemented. Spend some time analysing the likely causes of resistance to change and the likely drivers for change among both staff and management at the college.

Most resistance to change is a result of fear – whether or not the fear is rational. Consider whether staff are likely to fear any of the following as a result of the changes being proposed:

- Loss of control
- Loss of job
- Loss of resources
- Loss of status.

If it is likely that any of these fears exist then it is best to address them before making changes. Using project teams that include staff at all levels will help to offset many of these fears. Including staff who will be affected by the changes in planning the implementation will also reduce the resistance to change. The force field diagram (Figure 1) shows some of the most probable positive and negative responses to change.

Communication is key. Be prepared to explain the following:

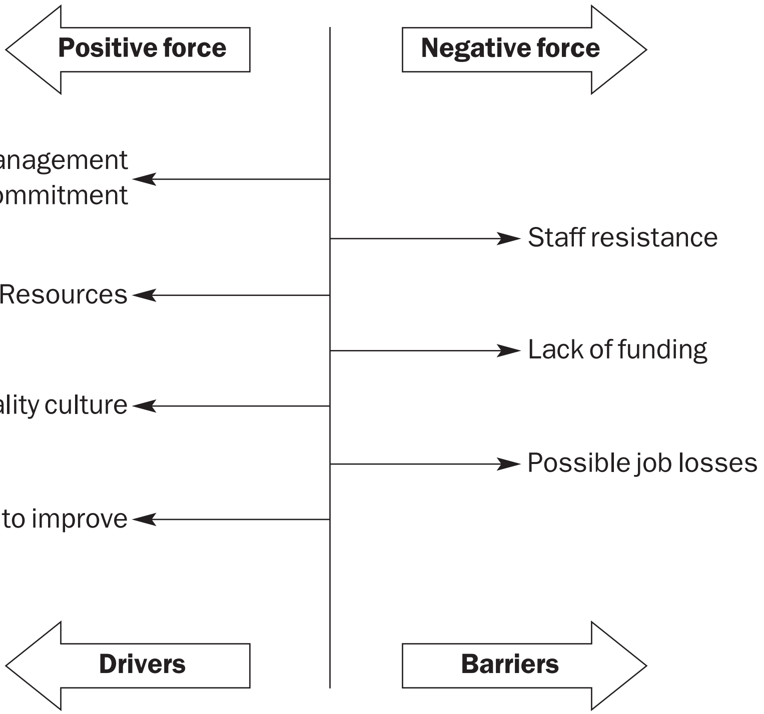
- Why change is necessary
- What the recommendations are
- What it will cost and the cost benefit
- What other benefits will result from the changes.

Review

Implementation is not the end of the process. Make sure that you review the new process on a regular basis. Ask whether the changes are delivering the improvements you expected. If there is little improvement then find out why; it could be that additional changes are needed. Even if the process is delivering improvements there is no reason why it should not be benchmarked again at a later date.

Communication is the most important part of any change process. Communicate the results of the benchmarking project to all staff and explain why it is necessary to make changes.

Figure 1. A forcefield diagram showing some of the most probable positive and negative responses to change



Common causes of failure

It is unfortunate that many benchmarking projects fail. This is usually due to cutting corners and treating the project as an exercise in industrial tourism instead of a systematic project-based process. The main reasons for failure are:

The wrong process is chosen for the project

- The project is not a critical process – resources are diverted into looking at something that is not linked to business priorities or to customer and stakeholder needs.
- The project is too large.
- The project is not focused.

Lack of management support

- Management support is not gained at the start of the project.
- There is no senior champion.
- Management support is lost during the process.
- There are insufficient resources for the project.

Process stakeholders are not involved

- The process owner is not involved and enthused.
- The team is unrepresentative with no front line staff.

The process is not understood

- The process is not properly mapped.
- The map shows what should happen not what does happen.
- Customer needs are not understood.
- There are insufficient or inaccurate measurements of the process.

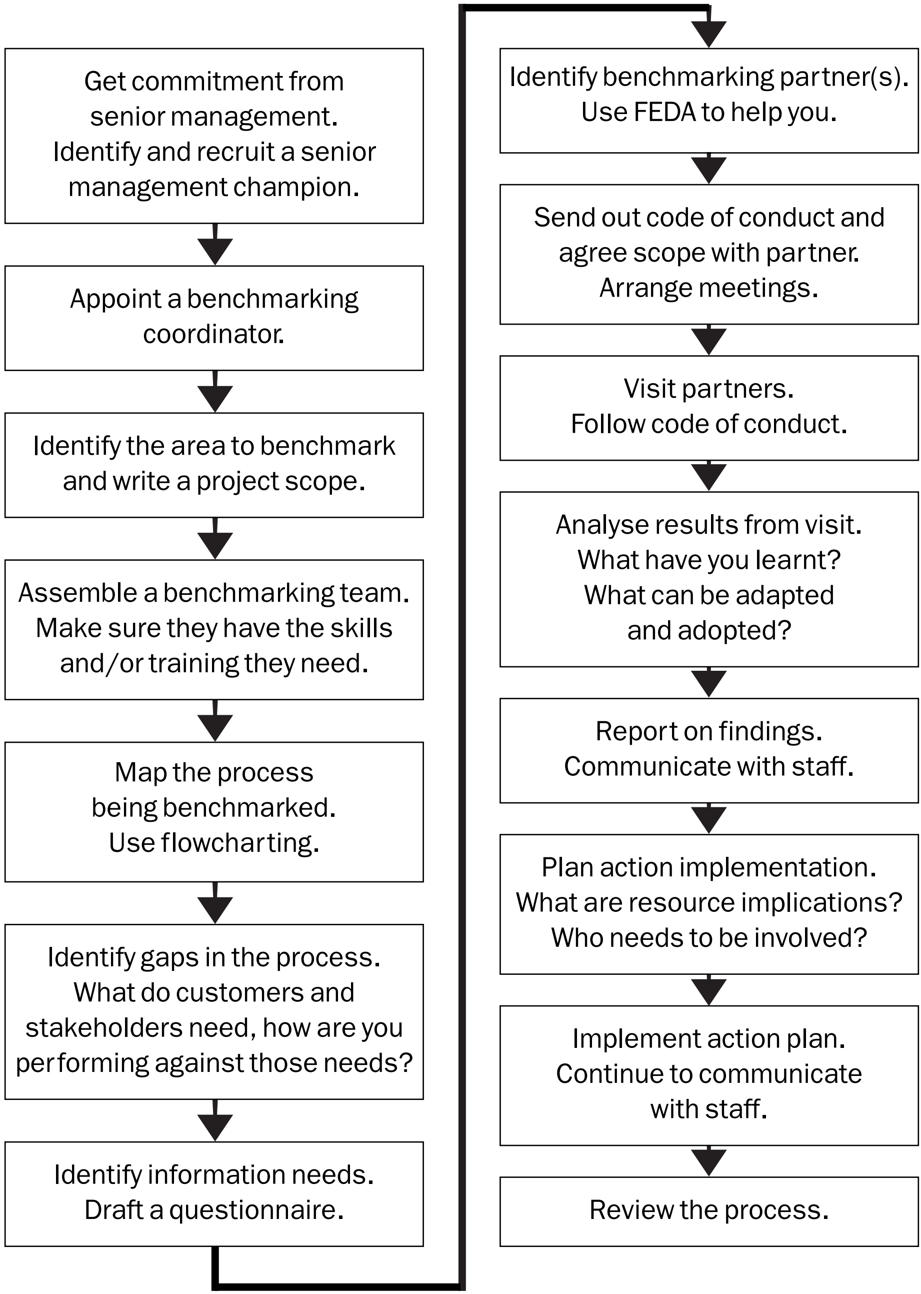
Communication failure

- Staff are suspicious of the reasons behind the project.
- The findings are not written up.
- Findings are not communicated to the organisation.
- Staff are not brought on board with the need for change.

Planning and implementation problems

- The project is not planned systematically.
- The implementation of proposed changes is not planned.

4. Summary


Get commitment from senior management. Identify and recruit a senior management champion.
Appoint a benchmarking coordinator.
Identify the area to benchmark and write a project scope.
Assemble a benchmarking team. Make sure they have the skills and/or training they need.
Map the process being benchmarked. Use flowcharting.
Identify gaps in the process. What do customers and stakeholders need, how are you performing against those needs?
Identify information needs. Draft a questionnaire.
Identify benchmarking partner(s). Use FEDA to help you.
Send out code of conduct and agree scope with partner. Arrange meetings.
Visit partners. Follow code of conduct.
Analyse results from visit. What have you learnt? What can be adapted and adopted?
Report on findings. Communicate with staff.
Plan action implementation. What are resource implications? Who needs to be involved?
Implement action plan. Continue to communicate with staff.
Review the process.

5. Additional information

The *Raising quality and achievement* (RQA) programme

The RQA programme is sponsored by the DfEE and all support and activities are subsidised. It is aimed at all levels of staff at all colleges and offers extra support to colleges that are receiving Standards Fund money to improve their practice.RQA covers the following areas:

- Quality information and advice service – a front line information, advice and support helpline, backed up by a database of good practice and a team of quality specialists.
- Quality improvement team – on-site support from trained consultants for individual colleges on developing and implementing their plans to improve students' achievement and the quality of provision.
- Benchmarking and information – help for college managers to benchmark their activities, improve their processes and make better use of their own data.
- Development projects – 100 college-based projects to assess and increase the range of improvement strategies and to share models and case studies.
- Leadership and governance – help for governors, principals and team leaders to use their leadership skills to improve students' achievement and the quality of provision.

- Best practice – regional practitioner networks and quality forums to develop and promote good practice in cross-college and curriculum areas.

All work is backed up by a programme of research and evaluation. For further information telephone the programme manager on 0207 840 5323.

Processes

The technical definition of a process is: an activity or a series of activities that changes an input into an output. Inputs can include requests for information, letters of complaint or books. Outputs can include qualifications, learning or data.

Figure 2. A graphic representation of a process

Student satisfaction surveys

Knowing what your customers think of the service they receive from you is important to any organisation whether it is a college, commercial service provider or retailer.

For colleges, student feedback gives valuable information to managers about how effective their processes are and what service priorities should be. FEDA has produced a student satisfaction benchmark survey to allow colleges to survey students using pre-set questions. These questions can be used as a stand alone questionnaire or can be added to the college's own questionnaire. Results from the questionnaire can be used as an internal benchmark and can be compared with those from other colleges.

Staff satisfaction surveys

Staff – the internal customers within an organisation – are less likely to be surveyed than external customers such as students are. This is unfortunate because feedback from staff can give very important insights into both service successes and failures.

To support colleges in this area FEDA is producing a staff satisfaction benchmark survey to give colleges the same opportunity to survey staff as they have to survey students. As with the student satisfaction survey it uses pre-set questions that can be used as a stand alone questionnaire or can be added to the college's own questionnaire. Results from the questionnaire can be used as an internal benchmark and can be compared with those from other colleges.

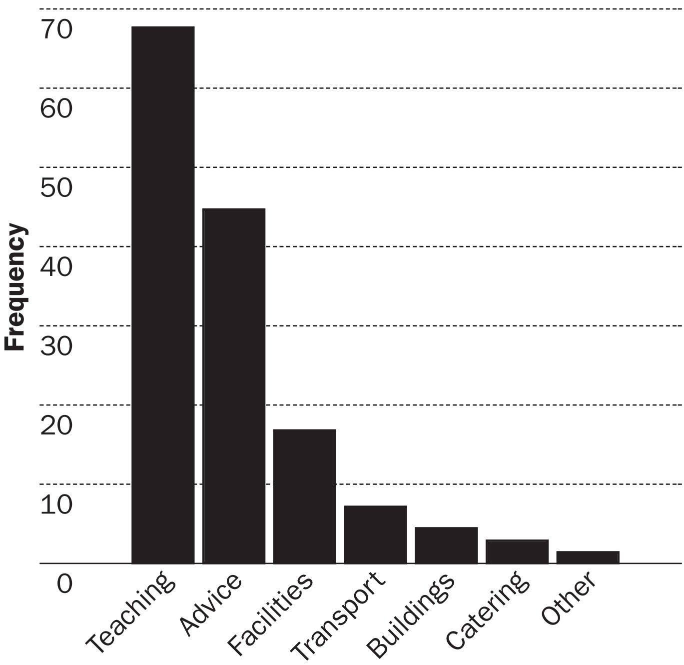
Pareto analysis

Pareto was an Italian economist who realised that 85% of the country's wealth was in the hands of 15% of the people. This basic principal, sometimes called the 80/20 rule appeared to be applicable to vast numbers of numeric facts. In factories, for example, 80% of the value of the stock held in store rooms is likely to be held by 20% of the items in stock. In surgeries 80% of visits to GPs are likely to be made by 20% of registered patients.
A simple way to utilise this tool is to analyse the root cause of complaints and comments made by students and staff over the past year. These root causes should then be categorised into groups and ranked according to how much they cost, how often they occur or how much time is spent solving the problems. It is usual to portray the results as a Pareto diagram with the most frequently occurring or most costly area to the left of the diagram and the least to the right. An example is shown in Figure 3.

Self-assessment

Self-assessment is already used by colleges to identify the strengths and weaknesses within the college (see FEFC Circular 97/13). Self-assessment reports are full

Figure 3. Pareto analysis: an example



of information that can be useful when deciding what areas to concentrate on for benchmarking projects. The process has the additional advantage of involving staff from within the college. FEDA has published *Self-assessment in practice* by Stella Dixon and Rosemary Moorse to support colleges undertaking self-assessment.

Critical success factors

Critical success factors are the aspects of a process or processes that must be carried out well if a service or product is to be successful. They are often linked to the goals and mission statements of organisations and form the basis of many performance indicators.

Probe

Probe is a benchmarking tool that has been developed by a partnership of organisations including CBI, London Business School and University of Northumbria in Newcastle (UNN). The tool is a way of getting a snapshot of how well your college works. It covers both the practices employed and the results achieved across a broad range of areas such as management style and understanding the customer. Probe is available in three versions: manufacturing probe, service probe and contour (environmental, health and safety). FEDA is working with UNN to develop a sector specific version of service probe for further education. Contact RQA at FEDA on 0207 840 5414 for more information.

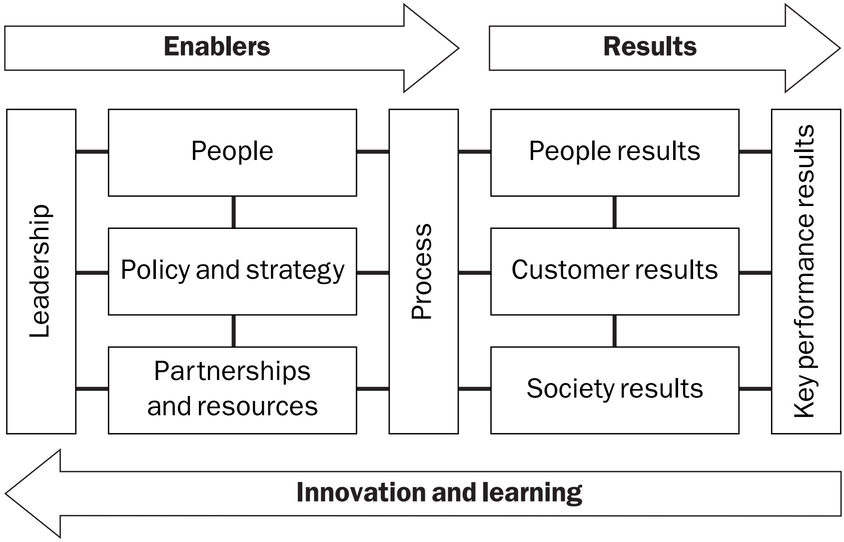
EFQM Excellence Model

The EFQM Excellence Model has been developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) and is promoted in the UK by the British Quality Foundation (BQF). The model is based on nine criteria. Five criteria are 'enablers' covering what an organisation does, i.e. leadership, people, policy and strategy, partnership and resources, and process. The remaining four are 'results' covering what an organisation achieves, i.e. people results, customer results, society results and key performance results.

The model is designed to be used as a self-assessment tool but, if an organisation feels its performance against the model meets the standards, an external assessment can be requested to obtain a Quality Award. To apply for the award an organisation must submit a 75-page document for assessment. If shortlisted, the organisation is then visited and a jury considers the results of the visit.

The model helps to identify strengths and weaknesses, provides a benchmark against which an organisation can measure itself from year to year, and allows an organisation to compare itself with other organisations.

Figure 4. EFQM Excellence model



Flowcharting

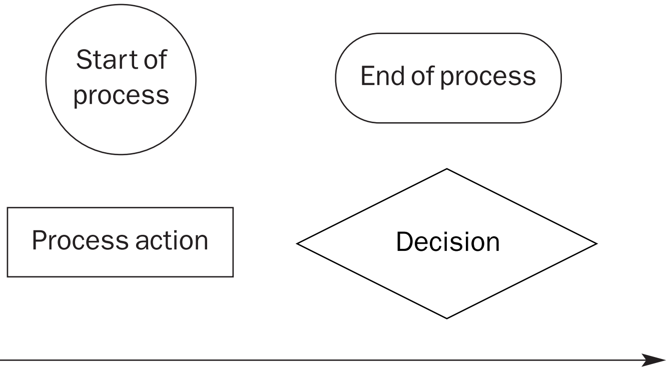
Flowcharting is a way to make sure that you understand each stage in a process and how each stage links to the next. A flowchart is simply a pictorial description of a process that shows activities and their results in the order they take place. The interaction between activities becomes much clearer using a flowchart than looking at a text-based description. It is much easier to identify duplication of effort and work that does not add to the value of process.

The following guidelines should be considered before flowcharting:

- The people who should develop the flowchart are those people involved in the process area.
- Use a facilitator who is not involved in the process to ask the obvious questions that people involved in the process are often not free to ask – 'why do this?' 'who is responsible?' and 'what is this for?'.

- Decide how detailed the flowchart will be before starting – it is easy to become so involved in the detail that the flowchart becomes unmanageable.
- The flowchart should initially be constructed using a wipe board or sticky notes as there will inevitably be a number of additions and changes to the chart as it is developed.
- Flowcharts often take longer to construct than anticipated. Allow for a second meeting where staff can bring along information highlighted during the first meeting.

The basic flowchart symbols are:



Connecting arrow showing direction of activity

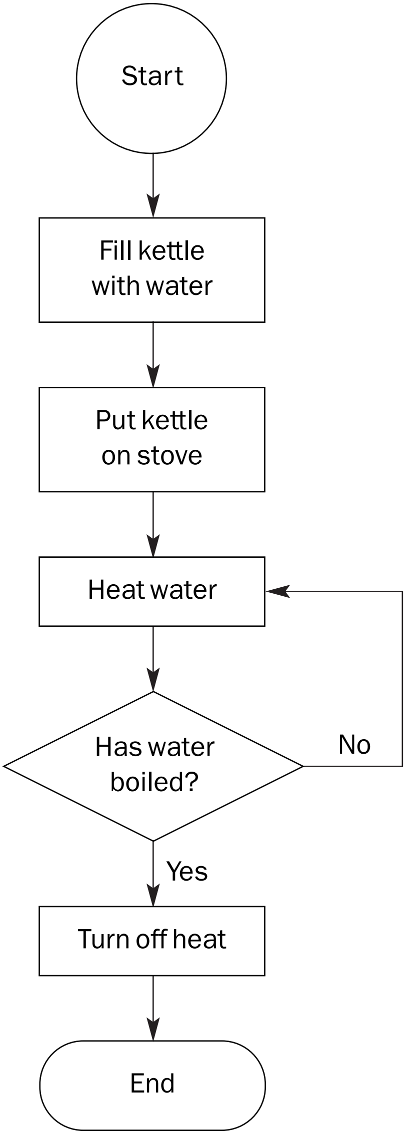
An example of a simple flowchart is shown overleaf.

FEDA benchmarking database

The FEDA benchmarking database is a service being developed for colleges to help them identify benchmarking partners. It lists colleges that are willing to act as partners and areas or processes that they consider to be examples of good practice.

If there are no suitable colleges available, FEDA will try to match your requirements with non-listed colleges or other organisations. Details of benchmarking projects will be kept to prevent both duplication of effort and overloading some colleges with visits. Contact RQA at FEDA.

Figure 5. An example of a simple flowchart



Code of conduct

For benchmarking to be successful it is vital that both partners are open and honest when taking part in a project. As a result, benchmarking can often involve access to sensitive information. The best way to overcome difficulties and to promote an open exchange is for both parties to agree to a code of conduct. The following example code of conduct is based on the European benchmarking code of conduct.

Example code of conduct

Preparation

- Demonstrate commitment by being prepared for the process before making an initial benchmarking contact.
- Make the most of your benchmarking partner's time by being fully prepared for each meeting.
- Help your benchmarking partners prepare by providing them with a questionnaire and agenda prior to benchmarking visits.

Contact

- Respect the culture of partner organisations and work within mutually agreed procedures.
- Use the preferred contact(s) designated by the partner organisation.
- Agree how far communication or responsibility is to be delegated in the course of the benchmarking exercise. Check mutual understanding.
- Obtain an individual's permission before providing their name in response to a contact request.

Exchange

- Be willing to provide the same type and level of information that you request from your benchmarking partner to your benchmarking partner.
- Clarify expectations and avoid misunderstanding by establishing the scope of the project as early as possible.
- Be honest.

Confidentiality

- Treat benchmarking findings as confidential to the individuals and organisations involved. Such information must not be communicated to third parties without prior consent. Make sure that you specify clearly what information is to be shared, and with whom.
- An organisation's participation in a study is confidential and should not be communicated externally without its prior permission.

Use of information

- Use information obtained through benchmarking only for purposes stated and agreed with the benchmarking partner.
- The use or communication of a benchmarking partner's name with the data obtained or the practices observed requires the prior permission of that partner.
- Contact lists or other contact information provided by benchmarking networks or databases will only be used for benchmarking.

Legality

- If there is any potential question on the legality of an activity, you should take legal advice.
- Avoid discussions or actions that could lead to or imply anti-competitive practices. Don't discuss your pricing policy with competitors.
- Do not obtain information by any means that could be interpreted as improper.
- Do not disclose or use any confidential information that may have been obtained through improper means, or that was disclosed by another in violation of duty of confidentiality.
- Do not pass on benchmarking findings to another organisation without first getting the permission of your benchmarking partner and without first ensuring that the data is appropriately anonymous so that the participants' identities are protected.

Completion

- Follow through each commitment made to your benchmarking partner in a timely manner.
- Try to complete each benchmarking project to the satisfaction of all benchmarking partners.

Understanding and agreement

- Understand how your benchmarking partner would like to be treated, and treat them in that way.
- Agree how your partner expects you to use the information provided, and do not use it in any way that would break that agreement.

References

Dixon, S and Moorse, R. *Self-assessment in practice.* London: FEDA, 1988.

Further Education Funding Council. *Self-assessment and inspection* (Circular 97/13). Coventry: FEFC, 1997.

6. Useful organisations

Raising quality and achievement
(RQA) programme at FEDA
Tel: 0207 840 8414   Website: www.feda.ac.uk

British Quality Foundation
Tel: 0207 654 5000
Website: www.quality-foundation.co.uk

European Foundation for Quality Management
Tel: (+32) 2 775 35 11   Website: www.efqm.org

EPIC (European Performance Improvement Centre)
Royal London House, 22 Finsbury Square,
London EC2A 1NL   Tel: 0207 614 7424