

CREATIVE BENCHMARKING IN MARKETING EDUCATION: COMPARING BEST PRACTICES AMONG DIVERGENT UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of what has been written on benchmarking in general, this article considers the concept in the tertiary marketing education context by investigating educational cooperation possibilities using systematic curriculum comparisons between two marketing departments located in Finland and in New Zealand. While relatively little research focusing on international educational benchmarking is available, the study attempts to pave the way for benchmarking between universities and other tertiary institutions that wish to develop their research and teaching. This article offers creative benchmarking, a variation on traditional benchmarking techniques. The key findings of the project indicate that educational benchmarking comparisons are especially beneficial and valuable in planning new course content, introducing innovative teaching methods, re-structuring the curriculum and exploring possibilities for future cooperation. Furthermore, the results of the study suggest that motivation for intrinsic cooperation building seems to be higher when the partners genuinely know each other.

CREATIVE BENCHMARKING – AN INTRODUCTION

Numerous books and articles discuss the concept of benchmarking and its applicability as a tool for development (for a complete book review of benchmarking related books see Zairi and Youssef 1995, 1996; see also Dattakumar and Jagadeesh 2003). Benchmarking is a versatile concept that has no strict definition. Generally speaking, it refers to identifying, learning, and adopting best practices or the highest standard of excellence in order to improve one's own performance. Although the definition of benchmarking is highly contextual, it involves complete and open sharing of relevant information between the organizations involved. Benchmarking is widely used in business management, but it has acquired importance as a development tool in the public sector, too (Ammons 2001; Keehley et al. 1997). In fact, there are several benchmarking service providers in the public sector nowadays focusing on sharing good practices across the sector and encouraging learning through knowledge sharing, e.g., PSBS 2004.

In order to describe the benchmarking tool as explicitly as possible, we shall first define the concepts and notions employed. Benchmark refers to that standard, definable level of quality or process in organization B, (which can be called benchmark provider) against which or in relation to which organization A (benchmark appli-

er) wants to benchmark their own process. However, it must be noted the application of benchmarking which we have developed refutes the dichotomy of the benchmark provider and the benchmark applier. In our creative benchmarking application the partners rather look for partial benchmarks in each others processes, accepting, first of all, that performance indicators do not always capture the whole quality range of an educational process and secondly, that there can be parts of an educational process which are of extremely high quality and level of performance in spite of the low overall performance of a process, and thirdly that both partners can learn from one another and eventually cooperate with enhanced quality.

In the public sector, benchmarking involves the same basic stages as in the private sector starting with a diagnosis of the process which the organization A has chosen to benchmark. This is followed by a performance analysis of the same process in the institution B and a comparison of the performances. Finally, the organization should implement the steps necessary to achieve the benefits learned from others' best practices (O'Reagain and Keegan 2000). Various works on benchmarking also exemplify this four-stage approach: planning, analysis, action, and review (e.g., Codling 1995; Damelio 1995). Furthermore, O'Reagain and Keegan (2000) argue that benchmarking has been utilized in an innovative way in the public sector, giving examples of how benchmarking has been used to improve organizational efficiency in the U.K., how home

care institutions use benchmarking to improve efficiency and customer responsiveness in the Netherlands, and how higher education institutions have modernized management.

There are three typical features which can be detected in both theoretical and practical descriptions of benchmarking. Descriptions of benchmarking are often seething with enthusiasm, regularly emphasizing technical aspects but mostly stressing the importance of competition. Camp (1989, p. 248), for instance, defines the concept as a continuous process of measuring products, services, and practices against the toughest competitors or those companies recognized as industry leaders. Dervitsiotis (2000, p. 641) similarly defines benchmarking from the business point of view saying that benchmarking is “the systematic study and comparison of a company’s key performance indicators with those of competitors and others considered best-in-class in a specified function.” A definition developed by the European Union defines benchmarking as “making comparisons with other organizations and then learning the lessons that those comparisons yield” (Benchmarking Co-ordination Office 2004).

From an educational perspective, benchmarking can be defined as the act of analyzing performance, practices and processes within and between different educational institutions to obtain information for self-improvement (Stetar 1999). Educational benchmarking at universities, whilst not a new topic, has gained momentum during the past few years (see e.g., Endut, Abdullah, and Husain 2000; Löfström 2001; Mancuso 2001; Yorke 1999) and has become a much-discussed method of evaluation (Payne and Whitfield 1999). Universities across the world have applied various kinds of benchmarking approaches ranging from the institutional level to the departmental level to improve teaching methods, curriculum development as well as research practices. There is an increasing body of educational benchmarking studies that report best practices gained from benchmarking projects (e.g., Benjamin 1996; Engelkemeyer 1998; Kristensen 1997; Houshmand, Papadakis, and Ghoshal 1995; Payne and Whitfield 1999; Hefce 2003).

Should we now wish to consider benchmarking as a form of evaluation and further explore the commonalities and epitomizing key features of the various definitions of benchmarking, there are two qualifying conclusions. First, in all cases benchmarking is a future-oriented method of evaluation and second, benchmarking contains an interactive stimulus for development through evaluation. More often than not this stimulus contains an in-built ethos of competition. In more traditional evaluation methods the attention is often focused on what has happened and statically stating the mistakes. In benchmarking the interest is to think in a “what if” format e.g., what would happen in the future if, for instance, we were to apply the same kind of budgeting as organization B? What if we combined ideas or philosophies from a different line of

business to our own marketing processes? What if we joined together with C in doing D? This future-orientation also engenders organizational optimism for development and positive change.

As has become apparent, we have looked for those features in benchmarking, which best suit the nature of educational organizations, such as universities. One of those is the evaluative feature which is future-oriented. Let us now take a look at some other important aspects in benchmarking.

An interactive foundation is essential, as benchmarking evaluation cannot take place without a benchmarking partner. At a more profound level, the interactive stimulus refers to the basic psychological and sociological motivation needed to start the process of benchmarking, to keep it on going and to learn from it. Our experience is that psychological stimuli of admiration, curiosity, competition, and alliance enhance the benchmarking process. The same motivational basis promotes the utilization of the evaluation results and a willingness to reach concrete outcomes. We believe that the potential of benchmarking is not only in examining the collected data, but also in the social contacts and in the emotional process of comparison in face-to-face interaction with a partner. This “human factor in benchmarking activities” should be studied, understood, and clarified more critically than has been done so far (see also Dattakumar and Jagedeesh 2003, p. 192).

Managing the interactive stimulus inherent in benchmarking is an important step towards our concept of creative benchmarking. The ultimate aim of traditional benchmarking is to improve the performance of an organization by making use of what has been learned from the partner. This is an openly competition oriented approach. It is also the most prominent feature in the traditional benchmarking. Therefore, it is by no means lightly that we have chosen to downplay, if not abandon, this particular aspect of benchmarking. We consider this kind of orientation to be an impediment when aiming to explore of the potential of benchmarking for evaluation and cooperation building. It certainly contains a competitive stimulus, which sometimes causes problems for the benchmarking process itself. Companies are often unwilling to provide specific information that might threaten their own competitive advantage(s) (see Dervitsiotis 2000, p. 643). In non-profit institutions, the competitive issue is less of a concern when using benchmarking as a development tool.

As Doerfel and Ruben (2002, p. 13) describe it, there is an undeniable tension between competition and cooperation that must be addressed in benchmarking. Benchmarking in this study was taken beyond its traditional definition (i.e., learning **from** the best) in favor of a more cooperative approach (i.e., learning **with** the best). The creative benchmarking method aims to enhance the cooperative ethos. We call our approach creative, as it emphasizes creating something new through a careful process of

cooperative evaluation. Our creative benchmarking introduces an explicit model to exchange ideas and to consolidate international cooperation between universities. It specifically tries to meet the developmental needs of universities (Karjalainen, Kuortti, and Niinikoski 2002). It is also providing a new interpretation of the above-mentioned principles of future-orientation and interactive stimulus.

Creative benchmarking has been designed to function as a stepping-stone for cooperation building between higher education institutions. It values reciprocal learning between the partners and therefore it is, to some extent, more demanding than the traditional methods in which one learns from the best just to enhance one's own operations. According to Karjalainen et al. (2002, p. 37) "In creative benchmarking the partners are engaged in comparative assessment (leading to a creative process) and they try to recognize those processes that they would like to improve and to cooperate in." To achieve this aim, the following methodology was deemed appropriate.

METHODOLOGY

The University of Oulu launched an international benchmarking project in autumn 2000. The goals of the project were to facilitate strategically enhanced international educational cooperation and to further develop new kind of benchmarking methodologies. In creative benchmarking a university department performs comparative assessment with a chosen foreign partner. The partners will gain valuable insight into their own teaching, research and study practices through a comparison with the partner. In an ideal situation it may lead into development of study programs that adapt best practices from both partners. The benchmarking project at the University of Oulu involved seven pilot departments and their foreign partners. One of the first pilot departments was the Department of Marketing which is the case described in this paper. Since the completion of this pilot project a number of other benchmarking projects have been launched.

The first phase of the benchmarking project was to select a partner. In spring 2001 the Department of Marketing chose the Department of Marketing at the University of Otago. This particular partner was chosen since it was known to have a level of quality and the two departments already had a bilateral student exchange agreement with each other. Initially, the purpose of the comparison was to learn more about each other and of each other's teaching practices. Otago was contacted in March 2001 (Karjalainen et al. 2002, p. 109), and the project introduced to them.

The Benchmarking Teams

After Otago had accepted the benchmarking proposal, the second phase of the project was to build the Otago benchmarking teams. The teams are the main executive

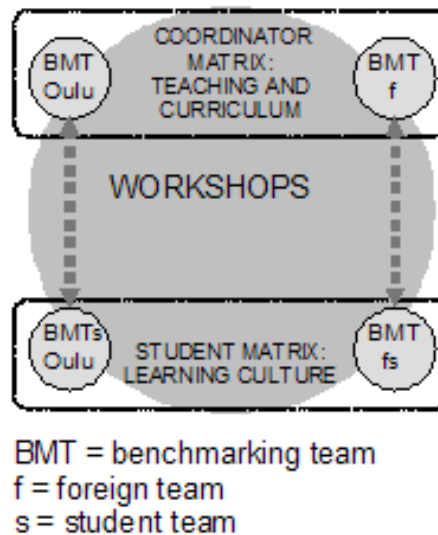
organs in the benchmarking work. They collect the necessary information for the initial comparison, distribute the tasks within the department so that all relevant parties are included and eventually ensure that the process descriptions made are accurate and have been carried out by those persons who really participate in and contribute to the described processes. Therefore, the mustering of the teams is a demanding task in which it is vital to carefully consider which persons would contribute the most and offer the necessary insights. The first team was made up of departmental staff (coordinator team) and the second team was made up of students (student team). Figure 1 explains the formulation of the four teams. Each team had between two and five members. The most important team task was to thoroughly fill in the assessment matrices and thus give a short but precise description of the departments. As can be seen from Figure 1, the matrix of the coordinator teams contained questions on teaching and curriculum, and the student matrix focused on questions of learning culture. In answering the questions the coordinator and student teams collaborated (grey dashed line). Figure 1 also shows that after all four teams had filled in the matrices they met in a workshop where the teams processed the information collected.

The Assessment Matrices

The assessment matrices used in the benchmarking project between Otago and Oulu were based on the long-term teaching developmental work carried out at the University of Oulu. The University of Oulu has been systematically assessing teaching quality since 1994. The principle method has been continuous departmental self-evaluation. The matrix used in the benchmarking was developed on the basis of the experiences gathered in the departmental self-evaluations over the past ten years and it is constructed so as to allow the collection of empirical data.

Thus, it was the matrix work which provided the basis for the comparisons between the departments in this benchmarking project. Generally speaking, the matrices are qualitative questionnaires, which include different question categories. Matrix questions can be designed and varied depending on the aims of the benchmarking project. This is what constituted the next phase in the project, i.e., the negotiation and deciding on the content of the benchmarking matrices. The two marketing departments modified the matrices (*coordinator matrix of marketing departments: see Karjalainen et al. 2002, p. 110*) as a joint exercise to serve their mutual goals so that they generated the important background knowledge that is needed when exploring the possibilities for long-term cooperation. It is essential that the matrices accurately reflect the departments so that the comparisons drawn will develop into a shared learning process for the teachers and students. In this case the coordinator team answered questions on

FIGURE 1
THE STRUCTURE OF BENCHMARKING TEAMS



issues such as teaching methods, quality assurance, curriculum, support services of teaching, and international education, whereas the student team focused on finding out what kind of learning culture prevailed in the departments.

Filling in the matrices was a significant self-evaluation process for the departments themselves and created a vast amount of information that would otherwise have been difficult or impossible to obtain. The matrices could also be used later on, e.g., when building relationships with third partners.

The Assessment Workshop

The departments independently filled in their matrices and produced qualitative descriptive feedback on their key procedures. Each team answered the questions by aggregating their thoughts and observations in the various boxes. After the teams had filled in the matrices, the responses were aligned next to each other to aid comparison. We call this the summary matrix 1 and this can be seen in Figure 2.

The concluding phase of the project was to organize an assessment workshop. This was a two-day session organized in New Zealand in March 2002 where the participants met each other, got to now know each other thoroughly, discussed the information in the matrices, digested experiences and planned future cooperation. During the workshop, participants documented their observations on a sheet we call summary matrix 2 (Figure 2). Table 1 shows an example of summary matrix 2, which

has been compiled from the discussions in the marketing workshop. This example is a shortened and simplified version as the benchmarking results are confidential. The participants examined both differences and similarities between their departments and analyzed the underlying reasons for these. This analysis and discussion lead to fruitful and innovative solutions for future cooperation and it became easier to tackle the observed differences.

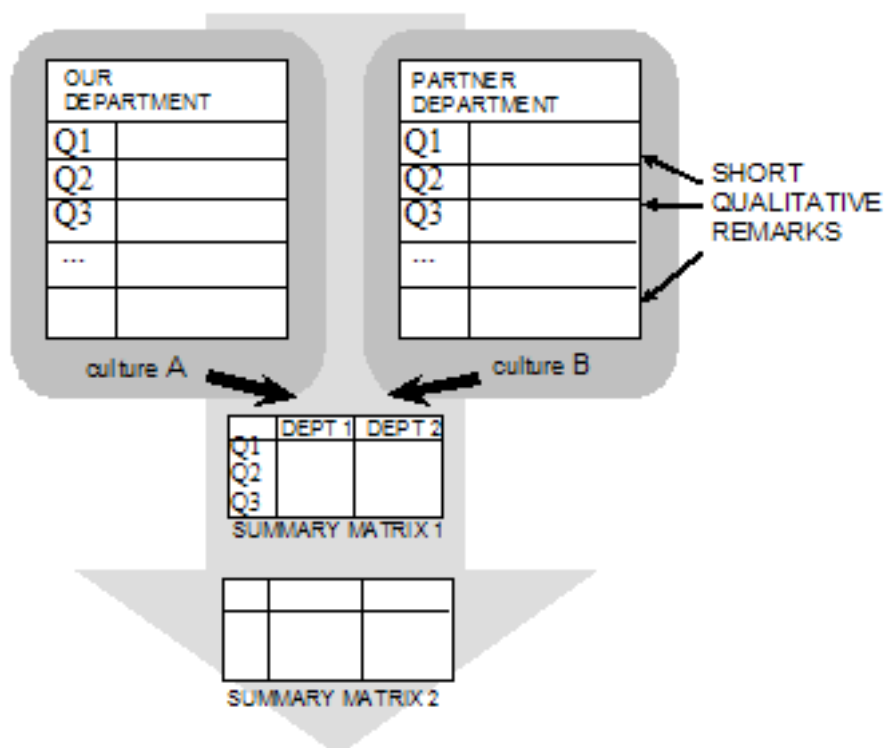
The first benchmarking workshop was decisive in identifying those areas of cooperation in which the project could proceed. The partners met a second time in Finland in September 2002. The purpose of the second meeting was to reach the final evaluation and summary of the project. The second meeting concentrated on investigating the opportunities for long-term educational and research cooperation.

Summary matrix 2, as shown in Table 1 was filled in cooperation between the student teams. The purpose of these matrices was to highlight critical issues rather than simply reflecting the experiences gained during the benchmarking project. The following section presents key findings from the summary matrix 2 and is split between the core observations the partners made and the best practices the partners learnt from each other and planned to implement.

Core Observations

The main observation from Oulu's point of view was that marketing education is more formal and school-like at Otago, meaning that students in Finland in general and

FIGURE 2
THE ASSESSMENT MATRICES OF THE BENCHMARKING TEAMS



students in Oulu in particular have more “academic freedom.” In the European context this means that students are relatively free to select their courses and attendance is up to the individual student. At the University of Otago students are in general younger and courses have a more fixed structure and pre-requisites. The teaching faculty at the University of Oulu have more autonomy in deciding the content of courses taught. However, both in Otago and Oulu each teacher’s own research background and interests are reflected in the courses she/he teaches. Otago faculty teach a combination of broad core material and specialist classes that reflect their own research stream and interest. Both departments strive to offer a good quality academic teaching material and a practical/hands-on component. At Otago a more cohesive curriculum is offered. In addition, Otago offered more IT supported teaching. However, Oulu also plans to utilize more IT in teaching in the near future, e.g., e-learning materials via the Web.

There were multiple outcomes from “learning best practices.” Firstly, Otago offers a number of training courses for new staff members – e.g., teaching techniques for small and large groups. Furthermore, new staff members attend a number of obligatory pedagogical courses at

Otago. Secondly, Otago has an interesting student representative system where students have an elected representative who acts as an intermediary between faculty and students reporting if there are any issues (either positive or negative) related to the delivery and content of each course or paper. Thirdly, students and teachers had informal and relatively close contacts at both Otago and Oulu. Lastly, teaching methods were found to be broadly the same. Both faculties used lectures, tutorials, case studies, and discussion on academic articles. In thinking about future cooperation possibilities, both faculties ambitiously agreed that planning a common MBA program organized partly via Web-based learning environment could be a possible way to proceed in this benchmarking project. Furthermore, joint journal articles (such as this one) and student/teacher exchanges were identified as other important areas for cooperation.

Probably as a result of the Finnish tertiary education systems Finnish students seem more committed in their studies and take more courses per year. However, at Otago the marketing courses are generally a little longer in duration. Moreover, it was found that students are offered more individual help through tutorials at Otago. Interestingly, commerce studies in general are not as appreciated

TABLE 1
SUMMARY MATRICES FILLED BY THE BENCHMARKING TEAMS

OULU	CORE OBSERVATIONS	CONCLUSIONS
1. Best practices What best practices, innovative ideas or particularly good procedures (for instance working habits, teaching/learning practices, etc.) have you discovered?	What are the main differences and similarities between the two departments? What are the underlying reasons (for instance cultural observations etc.) behind in these differences/similarities? Differences: Oulu does not have a similar level system. In Otago the student cannot (in theory) participate in higher level courses where pre-requisites exist. In Oulu there is more academic freedom and the students are on average older when entering the University. More IT solutions at Otago (surprising, but we are also moving to new facilities during this summer, probably this will bring the depts. closer together). PowerPoint is used in many lectures at Otago, also students use it in some presentations. In Otago they assess the education even more carefully than in Oulu. Learning new languages plays a huge role in Oulu. Guests from business life (visiting lecturers) are used in Otago. Ordinary degree = Bachelor's in Otago, whereas in Oulu only Master's degree is pursued. Otago also offers Dip Grads, Masters degrees and PhD by research. Similarities: Informal/close contacts between teachers and students in both countries. The staff is partly reluctant to participate in teaching development courses also in Oulu. Teaching development is supported in both of the places. Problem Based Learning is known in Oulu as well (not used in marketing dept.). Teaching methods; summarising/discussing articles, using article packages. Both departments use technology in teaching (it is strongly encouraged in Oulu).	What can we learn from the foreign department? How can we improve together our working procedures? Is it useful/necessary to change our activities? Notes on further development plan. New staff members can have a course on learning techniques for small/larger groups. We are interested in Otago's obligatory pedagogical training. → Oulu asked from Otago's HEDC to send us more information about the pedagogical courses. Otago marketing department uses Blackboard for many papers offered. Conference report via Outlook sounded like a useful idea. It explains e.g. where to participate, who to talk to (network), what was discussed, quality of the conference. Student representative system sounded interesting and it was discussed with students.

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)

OULU	CORE OBSERVATIONS	CONCLUSIONS
2. Cooperation What important options have you found concerning cooperation in the future (e.g. organizing mutual study modules)?	During our discussions we talked for example about: In Oulu there have been discussions in the faculty level that a whole degree program would be taught in English. Could there be more cooperation e.g. teacher exchange or intensive courses? (Building up further cooperation is a discussion between the departments.) Teacher exchange (our university could pay the flights to our teachers and part of the daily allowance of the work, could your university pay the accommodation and part of the daily allowance?) At the moment the departments have bilateral agreement for foreign exchange students. In Oulu Software Business-courses are offered in English. Building joint study option on the basis of SWB (brochures were given)? -What are your courses you could offer to this? -Our courses and what else can we offer to them? If organising courses together a Web-based learning environment (e.g. Disentum-Optima) could be used and accompanied with a netmeeting or videoconference system? (Is there enough interactivity?) The participants discussed of the books that are used in lectures (course outline was given to us) and the system how the Professors are appointed.	Senior lecturer from Otago will be in Oulu later this year (2003) and we can organise workshop 2. Joint academic publication(s) will be written together. Oulu will send their book to Otago concerning benchmarking in higher education etc. Possible to write joint publication(s) on the areas such as internet/online marketing. Other cooperation: A researcher (online marketing) will come to Oulu next autumn, and the funding was organised after returning to Finland. We can give the pictures of the visit to Otago University for the International Relations Office to use. Our student is working on the students' ideas on the matrix and Otago's students summary matrix will be filled/checked later. E-mail addresses of the students of Otago University? Question, "How did this matrix evaluation feel?" was discussed at the end. The participants thought it was fairly easy to fill in the matrix, therefore that the topics were familiar, but it requires time.
Are there any possibilities to cooperate in the future?		

TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)

OTAGO	CORE OBSERVATIONS	CONCLUSIONS
1. Best practices What best practices, innovative ideas or particularly good procedures (for instance working habits, teaching/learning practices, etc.) have you discovered?	What are the main differences and similarities between the two departments? What are the underlying reasons (for instance cultural observations etc.) behind in these differences/similarities? Oulu has a less cohesive curriculum, staff appears to have more autonomy. Academic/scientific skills appear to be taught earlier in the program at a higher level. Teaching appears more traditional. Less interaction between staff and students at Oulu. Higher expectations/less assistance from students at Oulu. In terms of similarities, we both strive to offer core materials and a practical/hands-on component. Theses at Otago may be literature based and not necessarily connected to a sponsoring company but would normally be based on some primary data generated by the student. More formal and detailed teaching evaluation at Otago. More structured curriculum, broader curriculum at Otago.	What can we learn from the foreign department? How can we improve together our working procedures? Is it useful/necessary to change our activities? Notes on further development plan. There is an incentive to get students to learn academic skills earlier and more intensively. Further research initiatives should be pursued Student and staff exchanges should be encouraged. Students could seek part-time employment in Oulu to subsidise cost of living. A departmental PhD meeting was attended by one Otago Senior Lecturer and the interaction was collegial and beneficial to both parties.

in New Zealand as they are in Finland. Furthermore, Oulu also seems to teach academic skills, such as reading academic journal articles, analyzing and discussing them, earlier in the curriculum. This might be due to the fact that students are younger when entering the university at Otago, and therefore they first need more assistance in skills such as presentation, communication, analysis, and computing. In Oulu students are considered to be “adults” and are therefore offered more freedom for example in choosing the courses. This in part means that there are also different expectations from the students.

Development Plan Derived from Matrices

Another significant outcome of the project, the summary matrix 2, implies that both departments learnt from each other and are planning how to turn the findings into action. From Oulu’s viewpoint, courses on teaching techniques have been planned and to a certain extent are already implemented. Secondly, Oulu regarded the conference report system as a useful idea and adopted it – it is now available on the Intranet of the university. The student representative system has not yet been realized. In terms of cooperation, several issues have been turned into action. One senior lecturer from Otago visited Oulu in 2003 and has since been supervising one Oulu doctoral candidate. Plans to write joint publications are being finalized. Furthermore, a student from Otago worked as a research assistant in Oulu for the winter term 2004 and Oulu is currently negotiating the possibility of sending a student to Otago to work as a part-time research assistant and study as an exchange student.

From Otago’s perspective, the best practices adopted concerned teaching issues. Otago felt that there was a need to get students to learn academic skills earlier and more intensely. This related to the fact that in Otago students need to be taught more practical business, practical and analytical skills as the entrance level of the students seemed to be lower.

CONCLUSION

The preliminary results of the project are encouraging in many ways. The concrete outcomes of the project

can be divided into three different levels. The first level outcome is the actual content of coordinator and student matrices. The realization of the workshop in itself is seen as the second level outcome. The most important task in the workshop was to go through the information produced by the matrices and to list observations and creative ideas onto the summary matrix 2. In the workshops the partners also started negotiations on whether the experiences and visions for cooperation could lead to long-term cooperation. Sustainable long-term cooperation is the third level outcome of the creative benchmarking project. After only two tests in the working environment it appears that the matrices are working reasonably well. Nevertheless, at this point it is too early to predict what kind of long-term cooperation will result of this pilot project. Many plans have been made for the future, but time will tell which ideas will in fact thrive and progress. The workshops organized were very fruitful and partners undoubtedly got to know each other very well. At this point some of the best practices found have already been implemented and some are in progress.

Although both departments regarded the project as positive and encouraging international cooperation, the future co-operation is not without challenges. One of the largest obstacles in cooperation is the geographic distance between the faculties (located on the opposite sides of the globe). Although modern communication technologies (e-mail, telephone, Internet video calls) can be used in building this kind of relationship, our project findings suggest that face-to-face contacts between the people in charge of the cooperation seems to be the best way to turn plans into action. Now, after the benchmarking project has been completed, the departments have two long-range plans of mutual interest: (1) to start a common master program on software business, and (2) to facilitate student and faculty exchanges.

As the methodology presented in the paper is new and exploratory, creative benchmarking has some limitations that must be taken into account when assessing the reliability and validity of the results. In the future, it would be interesting to undertake similar benchmarking comparisons with other international partners and develop a deeper understanding of the best practices found in educating marketing students.

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