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Excellence in e-learning: the key challenges for universities

Innovative impact

The E-xcellence methodology (e-xcellencelabel.eadtu.eu) facilitates higher education institutions in reviewing the quality of their e-learning offerings, supported by benchmarks, guiding resources and external assessors.

An analysis of E-xcellence reviews at nineteen higher education institutions was undertaken, in order to identify the most challenging aspects of e-learning provision for the institutions. The analysis revealed the E-xcellence benchmarks that were considered the most problematic in self-assessments, or which attracted the most planned actions for improvement.

This profiling exercise indicated that the main challenges were:

- developing e-learning strategy
- building online academic communities for students
- managing staff workload.

There was also a strong focus on increasing the interactivity of learning materials. In contrast, the provision of reliable IT systems and hardware was unproblematic.

Introduction

E-learning is increasingly important in Higher Education, but concerns are often raised about its quality (Vlachopoulos, 2016). An effective quality enhancement approach for HE institutions is to review and self-assess their e-learning provision, taking into account all the relevant aspects. The E-xcellence methodology (Kear et al., 2016; Kear, Williams & Rosewell, 2014) is a proven way to carry out such a review, supported by resources and external assessors. As recommended by Jung & Latchem (2012, pp. 268-9), it takes a quality enhancement stance that aims for continuous improvement.

The E-xcellence resources (<http://e-xcellencelabel.eadtu.eu/>) include a quality manual, guidance for institutions and assessors, and an online self-evaluation tool. E-xcellence uses a benchmarking approach (Ossiannilsson & Landgren, 2012) with 35 benchmark statements grouped under six headings: *Strategic Management*, *Curriculum Design*, *Course Design*, *Course Delivery*, *Staff Support* and *Student Support*. Institutions self-assess their capabilities against the benchmarks, and prepare a plan ('roadmap') of future actions mapped against them. Face-to-face or online discussions with external assessors complement the self-assessment and can lead to the award of an 'E-xcellence Associates in Quality' label.

E-xcellence reviews have been carried out at a number of European higher education institutions (HEIs) over the last ten years. These reviews, taken together, reveal aspects of e-learning that are particularly challenging for institutions. This article presents an analysis of the outputs from nineteen E-xcellence reviews carried out in the period 2009-2016 (Rosewell *et al* 2017). Identifying the benchmarks which institutions frequently self-assessed as problematic, and those which attracted the most planned actions, highlights the aspects of e-learning that institutions find most challenging.

Findings

The results from self-assessment data (see Figure 1) show that staff *Workload management* is the benchmark most commonly rated as problematic. The development of online *Academic communities* is the next most problematic benchmark (and this same concern may also be reflected in self-assessments for *Social media*). The issue of an *E-learning strategy* is also highlighted as problematic.

All institutions viewed some benchmarks as unproblematic (already largely or fully achieved). For example, *Reliability and security* was not rated as problematic by any institution. Notably, all benchmarks in

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the area of *Student Support*, with the exception of *Social media*, were judged unproblematic.

Considering the data from the institutions' roadmaps for improvement reveals both similarities and differences to the pattern shown in the self-assessments. Some benchmarks feature similarly: *E-learning strategy*, *Workload management* and *Academic communities* are seen as problematic in self-assessments, and are also identified in many institutions' roadmaps for improvement. However, other benchmarks differ on the two measures. For example, the largest number of roadmap actions was for *Interactivity* although this benchmark was not commonly judged problematic in the self-assessments. Also there were relatively high numbers of planned actions for some of the *Student Support* benchmarks, even though most of these were judged unproblematic in the self-assessments.

Discussion

Based on data from the institutions' self-assessments and roadmaps, the analysis identified several key issues that institutions find challenging when implementing e-learning. These are: e-learning strategy; staff workload; academic community; and, to some extent, interactivity. The analysis has also shown that the more practical and technical aspects, such as providing information for students, and technical infrastructure, are relatively unproblematic. It is encouraging that these 'building blocks' of quality e-learning are in place.

Comparing the two sources of data (self-assessments and roadmaps) raises further considerations about the issues identified and the E-xcellence process itself. One might assume that benchmarks that are frequently scored as problematic in self-assessments would lead to planned actions listed in the roadmap. To a large extent this is the pattern seen. However, the two sets of data are not entirely consistent. Notably, there were a large number of roadmap actions for *Interactivity* even though this benchmark was not highlighted as problematic in self-assessments.

Perhaps institutions find it relatively straightforward to include actions in their roadmap that have already had some work done on them, and are thus not scored as particularly problematic in self-assessments. One example is *Interactivity*. Improvements here are core concerns for many e-learning practitioners, who wish to improve quality by moving away from e-learning as transmissive content delivery; however, current provision may not be seen as particularly problematic. There could also be issues highlighted as problematic in self-assessments where no plans have yet solidified that can be committed to a roadmap. *Social media* may be one example; institutions may have held back from planning major actions in this fast-moving area. More worrying would be to see evidence of issues frequently assessed as problematic, but for which few improvement actions are planned; there is little evidence of this in the current data.

Conclusion

An E-xcellence self-assessment and review is an opportunity for an institution to take stock of its e-learning provision, recognise its strengths and weaknesses, and plan actions that will enhance its quality of provision. Looking at evidence from past E-xcellence reviews suggests that HEIs introducing e-learning have faced particular challenges in:

- developing an institutional strategy for e-learning
- building online academic communities for students
- managing staff workload.

Many HEIs are also planning actions to improve the interactivity of their learning resources.

This picture of the issues that have proved to be challenging for HEIs moving into e-learning should be of value to other HEIs, and also to educational policy makers.

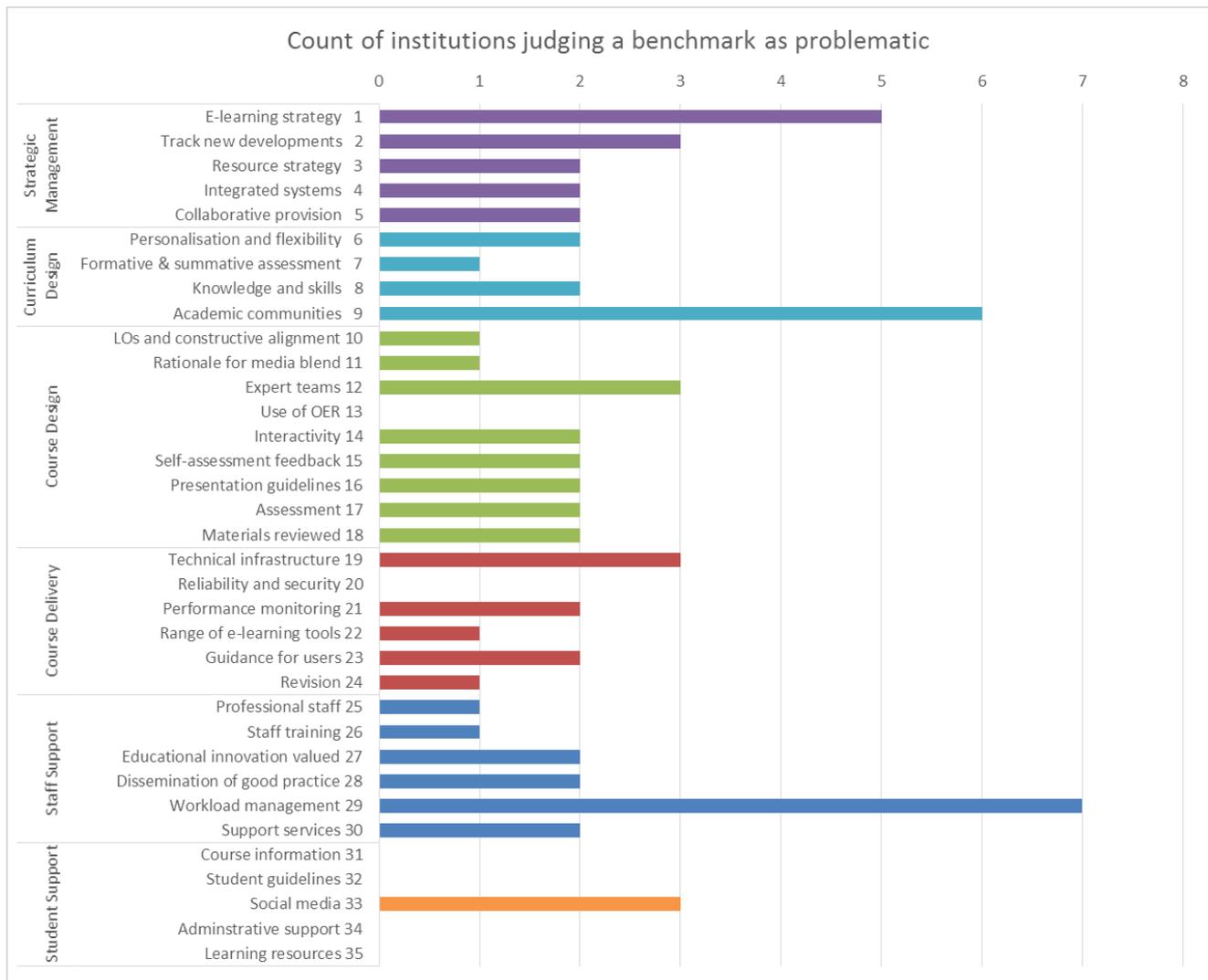


Figure 1: Count of institutions judging individual benchmarks as problematic in self-assessments