

Researching and Benchmarking Best Practice in Library Staff Development: A Joint Australia – United Kingdom Study

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ABSTRACT

University libraries throughout the world are engaged in staff development but benchmarking of these activities is not widespread. In January 2008, two university library organisations – CAVAL (Australia) and EMALINK (United Kingdom) – commenced a joint project to research and benchmark best practice in staff development in member libraries. The project acknowledged that changes in technology, learning and society have impacted library services; leading in turn to the need for new roles, skills and approaches to library human resources management and development. With the project still a work in progress as at July 2008, considerable effort remains to analyse the baseline data sets obtained from member libraries and use them to agree common indicators, and develop the ‘dashboard’ and database tools first envisaged. As an immediate benefit to individual member libraries however, baseline data should enable the development of more responsive staff development activities, and facilitate more effective planning for the future. This paper constitutes a progress report and case study of the CAVAL – EMALINK library staff development benchmarking project to July 2008. The paper outlines the drivers for benchmarking in library staff development and discusses why applied research of this kind is of potentially such great value to university and other libraries in the context of current issues impacting staff development: for example, recruitment and retention of staff. Details are provided of the research methodology agreed by the project partners, and the benchmarking dimensions investigated by the project. With preliminary data from EMALINK available in early July 2008, the paper reports on initial findings and considers important practical lessons in international collaboration.

Introduction and context

Most university libraries throughout the world are engaged in some level of staff development. Benchmarking of staff development activities however is not widespread and little useful data exists to enable meaningful comparisons between university libraries within national borders, let alone provide meaningful international perspectives. Three studies in the first half of this decade examined staff development policy and practice in the university library sector in Australia and the United Kingdom (Smith, 2002 and 2006; Yeoh et al, 2004). Significantly, the studies enabled limited international comparisons where none had been previously possible.

In January 2008, two university library organisations – CAVAL¹ in Australia and EMALINK² in the United Kingdom - commenced a joint project to further develop this process of comparison by benchmarking staff development practices within their member libraries. Although located in different hemispheres and literally half a world away from each other, CAVAL and EMALINK were assessed as good candidates for a benchmarking study. Both organisations are roughly similar in terms of their size, composition and orientation. Prior to 2008, they had also already shared expertise relating to staff development and key personnel had worked together as members of IFLA's Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning Section. A collaborative project thus appeared to offer CAVAL and EMALINK a unique opportunity to provide value to their member libraries in two key ways:

1. By identifying, comparing and generally sharing knowledge about current staff development practices and processes; and,
2. By establishing common measurement points, indicators and best practice benchmarks to assist with planning improvements in future staff development practices and processes.

On the ground, the project aimed to obtain data and test various assumptions that would enable the development of a practical tool to facilitate ongoing benchmarking between CAVAL and EMALINK member libraries. Longer term, the project hoped to inform the development of a marketable “dashboard” of indicators for benchmarking staff development activities in other libraries at national and international levels. CAVAL also planned to establish a database of indicators in order to build up a longitudinal data set to

¹ CAVAL Ltd is an Australian not-for-profit company owned by 12 universities in Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania. Established in 1978 as a cooperative venture by the Victorian university libraries, CAVAL has provided a variety of services to libraries on a collaborative and commercial basis including shared catalogue systems and services, consultancy services, training and staff development, inter-library-loan and document delivery services and systems, and storage for library materials.

² The EMALINK steering group represents the staff development and training activities in the 10 university and higher education libraries included in the United Kingdom's East Midland University Association (EMUA).

facilitate trend analysis. In tandem with these aims, the project also sought to demonstrate how recent developments in information and communications technology (ICT), particularly social networking technology, have helped to facilitate international collaborative library research projects.

Originally projected for completion in late 2008, the project encountered logistical challenges on the Australian side within several months of commencement. Rather than delay or compromise the entire project, CAVAL withdrew temporarily, thereby allowing EMALINK to push ahead with a pilot survey of its members in the United Kingdom. In this way, EMALINK was able to complete base level data collection already undertaken by CAVAL in 2006 (Hallam, 2007).

This paper constitutes a progress report and case study of the CAVAL – EMALINK library staff development benchmarking project to July 2008. The paper outlines the drivers for benchmarking in library staff development and discusses why applied research of this kind is of potentially such great value to university and other libraries in the context of current issues impacting staff development: for example, recruitment and retention of staff. Details are provided of the research methodology agreed by CAVAL and EMALINK, and the benchmarking dimensions investigated by the project. With preliminary data from EMALINK available in early July 2008, the paper reports on initial findings and considers important practical lessons in international collaboration learned to date.

Understanding the value of benchmarking

In the context of libraries, benchmarking may be defined as an ongoing structured process by which we evaluate the functions, work processes and services of other organisations (not always libraries) recognised for their leadership and innovation. This process of evaluation is undertaken for the purpose of organisational comparison and improvement (adapted from Spendolini, 1992). The concept of *competitive benchmarking*, later ‘benchmarking’, was first popularised by the Xerox Corporation in the late 1970s as an innovative response – at that time – to strong competition in a market segment that it had hitherto dominated (see for example: Elmuti and Kathawala, 1997; Ford, 1993). Xerox refined the concept of benchmarking through the 1980s and eventually promulgated a ten-step benchmarking process. Despite there now being many competing process models for benchmarking, most can trace their origins back twenty years to the original Xerox process, and early variations. Other influences cited as significant in the development of the concept of benchmarking include the quality assurance movement and just-in-time manufacturing methods (Longbottom, 2000). Indeed, Deming’s classic four step quality improvement process (plan, do, check and act) still forms the basis of many benchmarking exercises (Ford, 1993).

Benchmarking is essentially concerned with understanding how processes work – through observing and studying work methods and practices – and then identifying good or best practice. Benchmarking seeks to learn from the observation of such good and best practice,

and to make improvements necessary to reach identified standards of good and best practice. Assessment of improvement is based on review and comparison with other like organisations; hence the significance of a good match between CAVAL and EMALINK (Elmuti and Kathawala, 1997; Longbottom, 2000).

Drawing on Deming's four step process, Ford (1993) and Longbottom (2000) each propose useful models for benchmarking; Ford specifically in the context of benchmarking human resource development (HRD).³ It is Longbottom's 'PAIR' approach however that resonates through the methodology applied in the CAVAL-EMALINK project:

- Planning - investigation, measurement and examination of the strengths and weaknesses of current processes;
- Analysis – identifying potential benchmarking partners and then exchanging information, and observing and comparing processes;
- Implementation – adaptation and modification of processes based on learning from the analysis stage;
- Review – ongoing review and refinement with the intention of achieving continuous improvements.

Within the higher education sector, libraries have frequently been early and enthusiastic adopters of benchmarking techniques. University libraries in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, for example, have all been at the forefront in adopting and applying benchmarking processes to various aspects of their operations (see for example: Jackson, 2001; McGregor, 2004; Wade and Henderson, 2000; Wilson *et al*, 2000).

In the case of Australia, the work of both McKinnon *et al* (2000) and Wilson *et al*, (2000) has been important in outlining suitable frameworks and encouraging the adoption of benchmarking methods in university libraries. Noting the need to identify benchmarks which would assess efficient use of resources and the quality of the contributions which university libraries make to the realisation of university objectives, McKinnon *et al* (2000) proposed a range of criterion reference benchmarks with the intention firstly of identifying attributes of good practice and then using those attributes as benchmarks for further

³ For the purpose of this paper, the term 'staff development' is used to cover professional development, staff training, workplace learning and human resource development (HRD). As used by human resource professionals (McLagan, 1996), the term HRD refers specifically to "the integrated use of training and development, career development, and organization development to improve individual effectiveness.

evaluation. The *Council of Australian University Librarians*⁴ has encouraged benchmarking between its members and has facilitated a range of studies in various operational areas including client satisfaction with library services, performance and effectiveness of document delivery services, availability of sought materials, cataloguing, and the re-shelving of library materials. Several trans-national benchmarking projects have also been undertaken with Australian libraries as a key partner, for example between libraries in Australia and New Zealand (Wade and Henderson, 2000) and Australia and the United Kingdom (Smith, 2006).

Staff development research in Australia and the United Kingdom

Attempts to examine and benchmark staff development practice in Australian university libraries can be traced back more than twenty years (Trask, 1983; Gray, 1986); with more recent work in Australia and the United Kingdom attempting to update and expand that work. Both early Australian surveys by Trask and Gray revealed a paucity of human resource development in the university library sector, albeit balanced by an emerging recognition at that time of the importance of developing people.

In 2001 and then again in 2005, Smith (2002, 2006) explored the extent of commitment to staff development, linkages to strategic organisational priorities, and the focus of staff development activity. The overall picture presented by these 2001 and 2005 surveys was of a strong commitment to investment in human resource development – a picture very different to that found in the earlier 1983 and 1986 analyses.

Smith concluded that the major influences on the focus of staff development programs in Australian university libraries included:

- Increasing scope and volume of electronic publishing, with consequent changes in required staff skills and knowledge;
- Increasing involvement of university library staff in teaching information literacy (with needs for skill development on the part of those staff doing such teaching);
- Changing organisational demographics (in particular ageing workforces), and actual or impending retirements of staff (particularly senior staff) – this resulting in the need for succession planning and development of new leadership and management capability; and,
- The imperative for regionally isolated libraries to grow and develop skills and capability within their existing workforce.

⁴ <http://www.caul.edu.au/>

For the first time, the 2005 survey explored budget allocations for staff development. This was interesting as a measure in its own right of the level of commitment to staff development activity. It also enabled benchmarking against a comparable survey undertaken in the United Kingdom, and several other available benchmarks including those of the *American Society for Training and Development* and *UNESCO* (refer Smith, 2006 for more detail).

In 2004, motivated partly by the 2001 Australian study, Yeoh *et al* (2004) investigated staff development in a cross section of university libraries in England, Scotland and Ireland. That survey found, inter alia:

- A strong commitment to staff development as part of institutional strategic organisational management;
- Formal written statements of commitment to staff development in just over half of the organisations surveyed;
- A planned and structured approach to staff development in most organisations; and,
- A structured appraisal and review of these activities in two thirds of organisations.

Viewed together, these Australian and United Kingdom surveys provided a unique opportunity to benchmark and compare practice across continents; with further comparison possible in the case of Australia, drawing on the two studies undertaken in the 1980s.

In September 2006, the CAVAL Human Resources Group (then known as the CAVAL Staff Development Group) sought to build on the work undertaken by Smith by funding and coordinating a project to study and benchmark current staff development practice in CAVAL member libraries. CAVAL invited Associate Professor Gillian Hallam of QUT, at that time a CAVAL Visiting Scholar, to coordinate the study and produce preliminary and final reports for consideration by the CAVAL Board. Looking longer term, CAVAL was interested in establishing the feasibility (or otherwise) of extending the research to the wider library and information sector in Australia, and overseas. It was also keen to develop common staff development indicators and a database to enable longitudinal studies. In retrospect, the survey instrument developed by the project team was arguably too broad, encompassing 97 questions over 46 pages, and too complex; partly a outcome of trying to align the survey with international studies, including *The Future of Human Resources in Canadian Libraries* (8Rs) released in 2005. As a result of the CAVAL survey's complexity, details of staff development practice within member libraries were largely obscured by other issues relating to recruitment and retention and succession planning.

Although providing a highly detailed and ultimately fascinating snapshot of human resources in CAVAL member libraries in late 2006, the project stalled after presentation of the preliminary findings in March 2007. Hallam noted in the conclusion to her report that

“the research project generated an immense amount of data that is of varying degrees of completeness and indeed of value.” (2007) She noted too that “the research instrument itself was complex, which potentially added further complications to the ability to undertake an effective comparative analysis and interpretation of the responses.” Interestingly, Hallam’s comments echo those of Ford, writing on benchmarking HRD: “choosing the wrong set of metrics is one of the surest ways to doom a benchmarking study.” (1993) For CAVAL, the over-riding challenge of the 2006 *Benchmarking of Staff Development Practice in CAVAL Member Libraries* project was how to go about “extracting the desired key measurement points needed if benchmark levels of practice and processes are to be established within the membership of the consortium.” (Hallam, 2007) With resources allocated to the CAVAL project exhausted by early 2007 and other projects moving to the fore, further progress on benchmarking staff development seemed unlikely in the short term. As one door closes, however, sometimes another opens. Enter at this point EMALINK, the East Midlands Library Information Network, representing the 10 university and higher education libraries comprising the United Kingdom’s East Midland University Association (EMUA).⁵

Why benchmark best practice in library staff development?

Before reporting on the methodology and early findings of the 2008 CAVAL-EMALINK study, it is important to understand the significance of benchmarking best practice in staff development to libraries in general. Libraries, it was long argued, were simply the sum of their collections – print and later electronic. A big library was ipso facto a good library. The majority of contemporary library measures still reflect this preoccupation with the physical item, even where electronic resources have taken precedence. The rise of the internet and increasing demands from customers have however progressively turned the focus of library managers to their people – arguably always their best information ‘assets’. People and the environments in which they live and work are not static though, and the parallel processes of personal and professional development must be ongoing. Thus libraries, particularly university libraries, have come to realise the significance of better understanding staff development through benchmarking. Many are returning to the origins of benchmarking as an organisational improvement tool, and Spendolini’s simple elevator definition of benchmarking as “learning from others” (1992).

Paster notes that “changes in the academic library workplace mirror those of other workplaces in the new millennium.” (2004) Expanding on this theme, she observes:

Following the nature of the work, the organisation of the institution is constantly shifting, requiring staff in all areas to perform a greater variety of tasks. The operations daily become more automated and more technical. The workforce becomes more diverse. The pace quickens. The budget tightens. And the tensions mount. (2004)

⁵ <http://www.emua.ac.uk/>

For libraries, particularly university libraries, there are also specific challenges to address. The last two decades have seen greatly increased emphases on access to information and knowledge management. Changes and developments in the ways and means of organising and accessing recorded knowledge have been both rapid and profound; with increasingly sophisticated information systems evolving as a result. As IFLA acknowledges, libraries and those who work in them have an increasingly important role to play in such an environment:

The quality of service provided to the public by library and information science institutions depends on the expertise of their staff. Constant flux in the needs of societies, changing technologies, and growth in professional knowledge demand that information workers must expand their understanding and update their skills on an ongoing basis. (Varlejs, 2008)

As a consequence of this transformation, human resource professionals in libraries are observing a range of issues impacting on and influencing staff development. Focussing on university libraries, Paster (2004) summarises these issues as follows:

- The need for library staff to keep current with continuous changes in information technology and with information itself;
- A related need to coordinate technical training for library staff, and find the expertise and resources to provide it;
- A strengthening of libraries' traditional customer service orientation in order to compete with Internet search engines and online booksellers;
- Further development of libraries' orientation towards teamwork, made necessary by shrinking budgets, decreases in staff numbers, and the rise of multifunctional teams;
- Additional support required for both new and experienced managers;
- Growth of the teaching and training role of university library staff, particularly but not exclusively those in professional positions; and finally,
- The need to provide meaningful staff development as a means of recruiting and retaining staff (also covered in detail by Sayers, 2007).

The imperative to maintain and upgrade the skills, knowledge, and abilities of library and information staff has been recognised, and is reflected, in the significant priority allocated to human resource development (HRD) activity in many libraries (see for example Smith, 2002, 2006; Yeoh *et al*, 2004). As a strategic organisational priority it is important that HRD is assessed and, where necessary, improved and that this be a continuing cyclical

activity. Benchmarking has clear potential to achieve that end. Indeed, benchmarking has particular applicability for HRD because the activity naturally lends itself to cooperative and collaborative working between institutions (Browell, 2000).

Ford (1993) proposes a series of metrics which may be usefully applied to benchmarking staff development. Some are relatively straightforward to measure and calculate, while others are more challenging. In broadly escalating degrees of difficulty in measurement these metrics include:

- Expenditure on staff development activities expressed as a percentage of payroll;
- Average hours spent on staff development per employee per annum;
- Average staff development cost per participant per hour;
- Percentage of employees undertaking staff development activity per annum;
- Average percentage of positive ratings of staff development activities by participants;
- Average percentage of gains in learning reported by participants in staff development activities;
- Average percentage of improvement in on-the-job performance as a result of participation in staff development activities;
- Cost savings and efficiency gains as a result of participation in staff development activities.

Ford's eventual goal is to take raw data and convert it to ratios or percentages that can be monitored easily over time – in effect, a staff development 'dashboard'. Although nowhere near this level of sophistication, IFLA's *Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning Quality Guidelines Project* has published useful best practice indicators for staff development (Varlejs, 2008). IFLA requires that there be:

1. Regular learning needs assessment

2. Broad range of learning opportunities, both formal and informal; formal offerings in a choice of formats, designed to meet identified needs, in modules structured to cover topics from introductory through advanced.
3. Organizational commitment and leadership from staff development and continuing education administrators with expertise in adult continuing education
4. Widely disseminated information about continuing education and resources, accurately described
5. C[ontinuing] E[ducation] activities design that includes learning objectives aligned with identified needs; follows principles of instructional design and learning theory; selects course instructors on the basis of both subject knowledge and teaching ability; attends to transfer of training and feedback
6. Consistent documentation of individuals' participation in learning and recognition of continuing learning in hiring and promotion decisions
7. A minimum of 0.5 to 1.0 % of institutional budget earmarked for staff development, as stated in *The public library service: IFLA/UNESCO guidelines for development* - <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s8/proj/publ97.pdf>
8. About 10 % of work hours provided for attendance at workshops, conferences, in-service training, and other educational activities, and for informal learning projects
9. Evaluation of continuing education and staff development offerings and programs
10. Research that assesses the state of CPD and examines the efficacy and outcomes of continuing education and staff development programs

CAVAL – EMALINK study methodology

In October 2007, Ian Smith (La Trobe University Library) and Graham Walton (Loughborough University Library) proposed that CAVAL in Australia and EMALINK in the United Kingdom undertake a joint study to identify best practice in staff development in member libraries. They highlighted a number of benefits to individual member libraries, including:

- Acquisition of staff development data to inform and guide ongoing change processes;
- Opportunity to undertake national and international level comparisons; and,

- Opportunity for international partnering and skills exchange.

Within the context of developing and delivering the project, the proposal acknowledged that university libraries are busy organisations and that no funds had been budgeted for the project by CAVAL or EMALINK in 2008. It was considered crucial therefore that the work should not be time or resource intensive, particularly in relation to project management and data collection. A relatively brief web based questionnaire was suggested to minimise the time and effort required for survey development, administration and analysis.

Smith and Walton proposed that the project should be jointly overseen by a small team of nominated representatives from the CAVAL Human Resources Group and EMALINK. This working group would take responsibility for jointly developing and administering the survey questionnaire, analysing the data obtained, and producing a summary report for dissemination to individual member libraries. The proposed study methodology called for data collection to take place through a web based questionnaire, with questions taking no more than 20 minutes in total to complete.

In scoping the 2006 staff development benchmarking study involving CAVAL member libraries, Smith originally proposed eight benchmarking dimensions:

1. Budget allocation for staff development expressed as a percentage of total payroll costs. Further, what elements are covered by that budget and what budget model is applied for staff development (e.g., centralised or distributed)?
2. Approval criteria and processes – how are staff development applications assessed and approved?
3. Links between staff development priorities and strategic planning;
4. Organisational approaches to the development, documentation and evaluation of staff development plans;
5. Common themes and priorities in staff development plans;
6. Application of *Rodski* results in setting staff development objectives - have staff development investments in turn improved *Rodski* ratings?
7. Coordination of staff development in CAVAL member libraries – how and by whom?
8. Evaluation of staff development programs by the organisation and measurement of the return on investment (ROI).

The 2008 pilot survey questionnaire used with EMALINK member libraries comprised 13 questions, incorporating a mix of open and closed questions. Broadly, the following topics were covered:

- Number of staff employed;
- Budget for staff development, as percentage of total payroll / staffing expenditure;
- Staff development approaches covered by this expenditure: e.g., conference attendance, external training events and online learning;
- Total hours spent on staff development per annum and the cost of these hours;
- Major themes, priorities and focus of university library staff development;
- Approaches used for the evaluation of staff development;
- Links to a formal performance management or appraisal system;
- Inclusion of a career planning focus;
- Planning and managing the staff development program;
- Measuring quality improvement as a result of staff development; and,
- Staff development challenges facing university libraries in the next five years.

By mid-July 2008, EMALINK had received an encouraging seven responses from a total membership of ten university libraries. In 2006, CAVAL received responses from all eleven members.⁶

Initial findings – CAVAL 2006 and EMALINK 2008

At time of writing, a detailed analysis of the EMALINK data had not been completed. The raw data, however, had already enabled some rough quantitative benchmarking with CAVAL member libraries and the IFLA guidelines (Varlejs, 2008).

For example, in the work undertaken for CAVAL in 2006, Hallam found that “most institutions (72%) had a specific budget allocation for staff development activities [Q.72], with the budget usually being a quantum of the total payroll, ranging from 0.5% to 2% [Q.73].” The EMALINK data confirmed specific budget allocations for six of the seven

⁶ In 2007, CAVAL’s membership increased from 11 to 12 with the addition of the University of Tasmania.

respondents (86%), with the allocation expressed as a percentage of total payroll expenditure ranging from 0.4% to 1.8% [Q. 2]. Both sets of data compare favourably with the IFLA guidelines, being a minimum of 0.5% to 1.0%.

In 2006, CAVAL member libraries were asked about the average number of hours staff spent on staff development activities per annum [Q. 76]. Hallam reported “a mixed bag of responses” with 72% unable to provide any data, one reporting an aggregated figure for all staff (814.5 hours) and the remainder ranging from 28 to 45 hours of staff development per person. Of more concern, Hallam found that respondents had difficulty providing an accurate breakdown of costs for staff development with a range of estimates from AUD 10 per hour to AUD 178 per hour. The data from EMALINK indicated that not one of the responding libraries had recorded the number of hours spent on staff development; nor had they costed the time spent on staff development. In this context, IFLA recommends that “about 10% of work hours [should be] provided for attendance at workshops, conferences, in-service training, and other educational activities” (Varlejs, 2008).

Another significant IFLA best practice guideline is that organisations evaluate the effectiveness of staff development activities. EMALINK data indicated that all seven responding members (100%) were evaluating staff development activity, with the majority employing a range of approaches including post-training evaluation sheets, performance reviews, reports by participants, and strategic overviews by management. Hallam found that 72% of CAVAL member libraries reported “mechanisms in place to evaluate the effectiveness of staff development programs [Q.86], with the most favoured mechanisms being evaluation forms at the end of a training event (64%) and evaluation forms completed some time after the event (45%), as well as the review of these forms by the presenter (55%) and/or by the person with designated responsibility for staff development (45%).” (2007) CAVAL data collected in 2006 also indicated that “a periodic review of the whole staff development program was conducted in 45% of cases, and a periodic review of parts of the program in 36% of cases.” (Hallam, 2007)

Ultimately, any benchmarking exercise must deliver strategic value to individual organisations and thus two other indicators are of particular interest to CAVAL and EMALINK. Firstly, is staff development linked to a formal performance management or appraisal process, thus enabling “regular learning needs assessment” and “consistent documentation of individuals’ participation in learning [relative to] hiring and promotion decisions” (Varlejs, 2008)? And the second indicator: has the investment in staff development resulted in measurable quality improvement? For EMALINK, the answer to the first question was ‘yes’ in five of seven responses (71%), with at minimum annual staff performance reviews conducted. To the second indicator, four responses (57%) were positive with examples of improvement including:

- “Customer service training following low LibQual scores led to raised scores in all surveys”; and,

- “Training on help desks has seen a measurable rise in user satisfaction.” (EMALINK, 2008)

In the CAVAL study two years earlier, Hallam reported:

The process of determining the training needs amongst professional and paraprofessional staff [Q.80, Q.81] is routinely (72%) embedded in the annual/semi-annual performance planning and review process. One organisation referred to their Workforce Planning and Career Development Scheme.

She also noted:

72% indicated that the strategic effectiveness of the staff development was evaluated [Q.57], although only two institutions did so from the perspective of return on investment in staff development activities. Three respondents hinted that this was a possible future direction and one declared there were partial activities, focusing on one or two high impact training events. Consideration is given to the general value to the organisation and to the perceived changes in staff behaviour achieved through the learning outcomes. ... The value of individual performance planning was stressed. (2007)

Working collaboratively – a tale of two hemispheres

Clearly, much work remains to be done by CAVAL and EMALINK to take the data sets obtained from member libraries over the past two years and use them to agree common indicators and develop the ‘dashboard’ and database tools envisaged in 2007. With project resources scarce until at least 2009, what have been the lessons learned to date, and how might this significant benchmarking collaboration be progressed from this point?

In late 2007, the project appeared quite straightforward, with comparatively few risk factors. CAVAL already had experience of similar surveys in Australia and there was a high level of motivation and trust on both sides. The various advantages of collaboration identified by Gray (1989) were all apparent to EMALINK and CAVAL. For example, the project team anticipated greater opportunities for creativity by involving people from each organisation. This pooling of expertise and effort was also expected to enhance overall capability. Furthermore, the team felt that a joint international project would give the study greater credibility and influence than would otherwise be possible. However, as the project took form in early 2008, some fundamental challenges began to become apparent:

Cultural differences

These were apparent at various levels throughout the project. For example, in Australia and the United Kingdom, noticeable variation existed in the typology of participating universities and their libraries. The variety of participating universities included research

intensive, long standing, newly created, learning and teaching focussed, multi campus and city centre based. These factors clearly impacted on staff development at the local level. Hallam (2007) had noted similar diversity across CAVAL member libraries study two years earlier, citing as an example the number of full time equivalent (FTE) staff: 28 for one member and 454 for another.

There were also cultural differences in the organisation and management of EMALINK and CAVAL. EMALINK is a very informal organisation and does not need to seek approval from its umbrella organisations to any great extent. CAVAL however is constituted as a not for profit company and project representatives were required to obtain direction and feedback at key stages.

Different stages of development in benchmarking staff development

Prior to commencing the project, CAVAL already had a successful track record in benchmarking staff development activities (Hallam, 2007); whereas for EMALINK, this was the first time it had undertaken such a study. CAVAL therefore could bring to the study reasonably recent benchmarking data, and practical experience on which to base ideas about relevant staff development indicators, and suitable questions.

Geographical separation

In the United Kingdom alone, the distance between the participating EMALINK university libraries was enough to make regular face to face communication very difficult. This was also the case in Australia where CAVAL university libraries are currently spread across three eastern seaboard states: Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania. The challenges posed by geographical separation were further magnified by a phenomenon one travel comedian has termed “Time Zone Aphasia” (Zwaagstra, 2008). With EMALINK located in the northern hemisphere and CAVAL the southern hemisphere, different time zones and also dissimilar academic calendars had to be considered every time a teleconference or turnaround deadline was considered.

Diverse agendas

CAVAL joined the project with the intention of building upon earlier benchmarking experience, and in collaboration with EMALINK, moving towards a common set of indicators with potentially wider application in university and other libraries. With baseline data already present, CAVAL was keen to move to the next level. This was in contrast to EMALINK, which saw the project as an opportunity for members to gain experience in benchmarking staff development for the first time.

EMALINK is primarily a free standing organisation with representation from university library managers concerned with staff development. Its energy had previously been directed to organising training sessions for university library staff across the English East Midlands. EMALINK also provided a support group for these staff, in which they could raise and discuss concerns around specific staffing issues. Embarking on this joint project with CAVAL represented EMALINK's first experience in working in partnership with another organisation. A seminar for EMALINK members presented by Ian Smith (La

Trobre University, Australia) at Loughborough University in 2005 provided the connection and impetus to see CAVAL as a possible partner. A benchmarking project was also seen by EMALINK as an extremely useful focus. Individual EMALINK members had engaged separately in benchmarking activities with other university libraries but never under the EMALINK umbrella.

Additional impetus for EMALINK was provided by various members' involvement in external quality validations. At the time of the project, several university libraries were going through accreditation or re-accreditation processes through Charter Mark (until recently, the United Kingdom's national standard for excellence in customer service) or Investors in People.⁷ This necessitated the development of evidence around key areas such as staff development. The project provided an ideal opportunity to contribute towards the information available on staff training and its monitoring and evaluation.

These various drivers very much influenced where EMALINK wanted the survey questionnaire to focus. Baseline data was needed but not in too much detail – a very general approach to survey design would be sufficient. CAVAL however had already arrived at a broad understanding of staff development practice in member libraries as a result of earlier benchmarking activities, and was concerned about 'survey fatigue'. Ultimately, the need to accommodate diverse agendas coupled with emergent resource considerations led to CAVAL's decision to withdraw temporarily from the project in May 2008; thereby allowing EMALINK to administer a more general pilot survey to its members in June 2008.

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, this paper constitutes a progress report. The CAVAL - EMALINK library staff development benchmarking project which commenced in early 2008 is still very much a work in progress. Over the course of the project to date however, the project team has learned some very valuable lessons. These lessons should stand the project in good stead when it moves to the next phase.

What worked?

Delegated responsibility – both CAVAL and EMALINK nominated individuals who could represent their respective organisations and form a joint project team capable of taking responsibility for the work.

Effective project planning – a draft project plan was produced by the EMALINK representatives, which subsequently went through various iterations until both sides had agreed clear objectives, timescales and outcomes.

⁷ <http://www.investorsinpeople.co.uk/>

Clear communication channels – the project team used telephone calls and emails to clearly specify and document all actions to be undertaken, and by whom. Where required to resolve local issues, separate face to face meetings took place in the United Kingdom between the EMALINK representatives and vice versa in Australia.

Use of information and communication technology (ICT) – the project could not have been progressed without heavy reliance on information and communication technology. Documents were routinely exchanged via e-mail and meetings via teleconference took place where possible. Little use was made of social networking tools such as wikis and VOIP applications like Skype, but further refinement of common staff development indicators would almost certainly profit from the application of these technologies.

What did not work?

Misaligned expectations – with hindsight, it is clear that both CAVAL and EMALINK representatives entered the collaboration with slightly different views about the survey questionnaire and staff development indicators to be benchmarked.

Insufficient resources – from May 2008, CAVAL was required to re-focus staff resources in other areas of the organisation and this had the effect of proscribing its direct involvement in the project. EMALINK however was able to push ahead with baseline data gathering and once data analysis has been completed in the United Kingdom both organisations will be roughly at the same point.

Looking ahead, CAVAL will host the inaugural *People in the Information Profession* conference in Melbourne, Australia in October 2009. This exciting two day conference will broadly address the theme of *reinvigorating the profession* and include four streams: statistics and software for human resource development (HRD); recruitment and retention; competencies and marketable skills; and, planning and forecasting. Without doubt, the findings of a successful joint Australia – United Kingdom library staff development benchmarking study will have much to contribute to this conference. To date, the first phase of the CAVAL – EMALINK project has already provided useful baseline data and some important practical lessons in international collaboration.

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