

### 4.3 Benchmarking and validation

#### Defining benchmarking on a personal and professional level

Do we use benchmarking in our daily life? What mechanisms do we use to continually improve our own appearance and performance?

Benchmarking in a wider social context is a quality management tool. It is used when comparing one organisation with another on some aspect of performance. We search and analyse information on various aspects of performance in which another organisation excels with the aim of improving our institution's performance and current practices.

The strategic approach to benchmarking looks at what is done by an organisation, whereas the operational benchmarking approach is interested in how success is achieved. The data-oriented approach to benchmarking examines the comparison of data-based scores to performance indicators.

To be effective benchmarking must be applied in a systematic and structured way. It goes through detailed data collection, processes and outcomes analysis, and assessment procedures to determine finally why certain performance is superior and how it can be matched and surpassed.



What aspects of performance in a rival institution would you be most interested in?

What would a plan of a benchmarking activity include in your context?

Will you use the operational or strategic approach?

How will you obtain and gather evidence?

What are the potential difficulties?

## Typology of benchmarking

### Internal benchmarking

It compares processes in different parts of the same organisation in order to identify, analyse and disseminate best practice.

For example, the administrative department in your institution has introduced an effective reporting system. The teaching department would like to apply some of the underlying principles and mechanisms. They will need to do some benchmarking activities.

### Functional benchmarking

It compares processes, practices and performance with similar processes and performance of other organisations in the same business (usually in different countries and places). For example, the national associations for quality language services in Europe constantly exchange experience to optimise their performance.

### Competitive benchmarking

It compares similar processes and practices of one organisation with those of a successful competitor for the purpose of continuous improvement and greater profitability. For example, you can learn a lot about advertising seeing the new poster or attending a high profile promotional event of a rival institution.

### Generic benchmarking

It compares different types of organisations on the basis of a single process, product or activity. For example, a language school can explore the registration procedures in hotels or medical institutions. It can also learn from private enterprises and non-profit organisations in the area of public relations.

## Benchmarking-related questions for reflection



Do you apply internal benchmarking in a systematic way in your organisation? How do you proceed?  
Are big chains of language schools in a more advantageous position?



How do you apply functional benchmarking in your institution? What are the advantages of this type of benchmarking?



What are the benefits and problem areas of competitive benchmarking?



Do you consider generic benchmarking worthwhile? In what way?



See the CD-Rom for examples of benchmarking applied in the UK educational context:

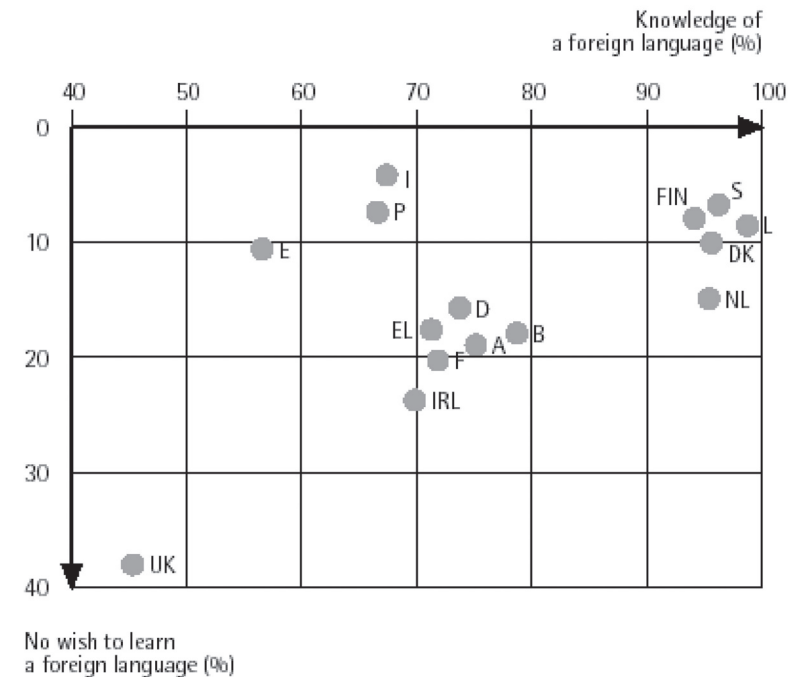
- [www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/internal\\_quality\\_assurance/MR\\_benchmarking.htm](http://www.ecml.at/html/quality/english/continuum/internal_quality_assurance/MR_benchmarking.htm).



### Indicators of quality

For benchmarking to be useful, it is crucial to identify meaningful indicators. Here are some examples of indicators used for general education in a report on quality in education<sup>13</sup>:

- attainment (mathematics, reading, science, foreign languages, learning to learn, ICT and civics);
- success and transition (dropout rates, completion of upper secondary education, participation rates in tertiary education);
- monitoring of school education (parental participation, evaluation and steering of school education);
- resources and structures (educational expenditure per student, education and training of teachers, participation rates in pre-primary education, number of students per computer).



13 European Commission (2000).

The report includes a survey of attitudes to foreign language learning and attainment comparing different European countries.

These indicators are very broad and general. It is much more difficult to develop good (that is, measurable, providing standards to set attainable targets) indicators for the day-to-day management of quality processes in a school.

### **Summary reflection**

Reflect on some of the following key questions.



*What indicators might be useful to identify best practice in the following areas?*

- *observation of classes;*
- *use of the Internet in language teaching;*
- *curriculum planning;*
- *use of the Common European Framework of Reference;*
- *in setting learning aims;*
- *in assessing proficiency.*



*Draft a suitable questionnaire for collecting comparative information on one of the above.*