Findings of the first benchmarking round in the IMPI Project

(March 2011)

A report in the context of the European project "Indicators for Mapping & Profiling Internationalisation" (IMPI)

General findings

The first item for inspection was what part of each group delivered answers, regardless of their quality, for the survey. All members answered in 4 out of 5 groups.

	Number of members[1]	Number of members that delivered data	%
Group A	8	8	100%
Group B	7	7	100%
Group C	13[2]	10	77%
Single HEI 1	2	2	100%
Single HEI 2	2	2	100%

Each of the groups or single HEIs chose an individual set of indicators. The size of the indicator sets varied remarkably (between 18 and 56). Usually for each indicator some data was found.

	No. of indicators chosen	No. of indicators answered	%
Group A	28	28	100%
Group B	18	18	100%
Group C	32	32	100%
single HEI 1	28	28	100%
single HEI 2	56	53	95%

In many cases, only few answers were given for a single indicator so that only one single HEI could successfully answer all indicators for all cases.

Group A	88%
Group B	82%
Group C	88%
single HEI 1	100%
single HEI 2	90%

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[1] in the case of single HEI, "members" are units or departments/faculties of the HEI
[2] 7 of those did not take part directly but via their association ACUP.

Special findings

Data quality and methodology

The quality of data provided, however, varied considerably. Often in the discussion it became clear that institutions had understood questions differently – despite having discussed them together before - that sometimes words were understood by everybody but entirely differently from another group member; for example, the term "international student". This seemed clear to everyone when choosing an indicator, yet when comparing the data the discussions showed that in one country this term was understood as referring to everybody coming from abroad regardless of nationality, while in others it was related to the passport.

The main result of this was that in many cases the data that was compiled was not suitably compatible: a typical problem for one-off benchmarking exercises. The participants learned that more refinement, more discussions and sometimes a second data gathering are necessary if results are to be fully compatible.

Methodologically, it could also be shown how the analysis of the data depends on the data quality and when certain instruments such as averages work and when not. Also the limitations or benefits of visualisation could be discussed at least in the group with usable data and the single HEIs.

Differences between self-assessment of single HEIs and groups

An important result of this first testing is that one-off benchmarking exercises work much better for self-assessment and inner-institutional reporting than for inter-institutional benchmarking. Both single HEIs delivered highly valuable and interpretable data. Data verification was felt to be easy between departments of comparable structure (one HEI runs a matrix system). For the central data, the process was even less complicated. A disadvantage was the focus on only two departments, but as the exercise functioned as an example and a trial, the HEIs learnt enough to run a larger scale exercise on their own. It also showed that in self-assessments large indicator sets (in one case 56!) do not pose much of a problem.

In the case of one single HEI, the process allowed the institution to compare activities and performance with regard to two bachelor's level degree programmes in a technical field. Data were provided for every one of the 28 indicators that were

examined and provided some important insight into the similarities and differences related toboth the extent and character of internationalisation within the two programmes. For example, while both programmes show fairly modest shares of incoming exchange students when compared to overall student numbers enrolled, as well as outgoing exchange students, 100% of all students in both programmes were enrolled in foreign language courses (see figures below).

O-025 What is the proportion of students enrolled in your foreign language courses of all your students in this academic year?

	Unit 1	Unit 2	Average
	100,00%	100,00%	100,00%
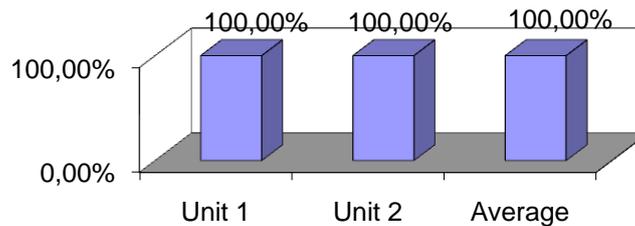
O-075 What is the share of incoming exchange students of all students enrolled in your unit last year?

	program 1	program 2	Average
	7,00%	10,60%	8,80%
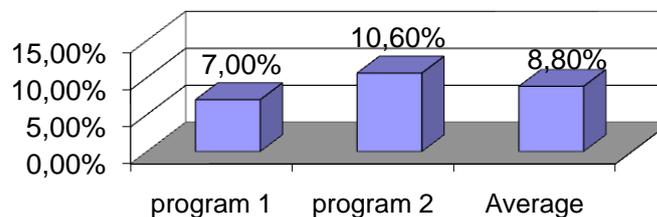
O-077 What is the share of outgoing students of all students enrolled in your unit in the last academic year?

	Unit 1	Unit 2	Average
	14%	9,70%	11,85%
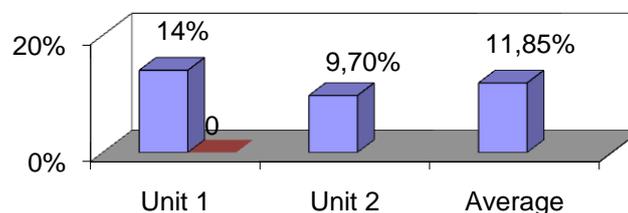
For groups, the process showed that for a benchmarking process as such it is also very important that all members understand the limitations of the given process and that the expectations are realistic. Another learning outcome is that group members have to be more aware of their own responsibility for defining and clarifying what each indicator is supposed to meet in their own institution. This requires more time than available in this first testing round; so in the next round we will make sure that more time for this exercise is available. It is also recommendable to involve a smaller set of indicators to have more time per indicator and more intensive preparation at each participating university prior to the group work, especially for the selection of indicators.

It was expected that the more heterogeneous a group, the more difficult data interpretation would be as conditions would be very different and data quality would consequently be lower. The testing showed that this is not necessarily the case. The most heterogeneous group could provide the most useful insights into their members despite the fact that misunderstandings also occurred here and indicators needed to be refined.

It was also noticeable that the group with the substantially smaller and thus more concentrated set of indicators (18) was more successful in the exercise than those who choose large scale sets (28-32). Thus the recommendation to restrict the group work to probably not more than 10 indicators is one of the learning outcomes of this testing round.

Overall, a general finding for the groups is that it is more recommendable to have a multi-step benchmarking process with preliminary self-assessment on larger indicator sets, followed by a more focused and better discussed indicator set.

Another learning outcome was that whenever a group member could not be present in the meeting when the final set of indicators was decided, this proved to be problematic afterwards, as these members were less likely to understand the indicator in a group-like sense, had more difficulties in delivering data and probably felt less inclined towards these indicators. As one participant phrased it: "you need to be sure that the person who has to gather the data has an intrinsic interest in doing so".

Outcomes on indicators

In the group that generated considerably more results from the benchmarking exercise, identified a number of important results concerning indicators:

1. The wording of an indicator is not clear enough: often the reason was specialised vocabulary, which was not specified in the group (e.g. what do we define as a ***total budget***?)

2. The indicator was clear but the data was not available: it was then considered that it would be helpful for the institution to demonstrate that others did have the relevant data and that their own procedures therefore needed amending.

3. All delivered data and the indicator were clear: direct comparison was therefore possible and carried out.

In the case of this group, as well as in that of the single HEIs, good forms of practice could be identified, e.g. on questions concerning how to include compulsory language courses in all programmes, how to recruit international staff or how to offer mobility windows in all degree courses. More often, good practice could be identified in terms of procedures to provide the data necessary for such an exercise.
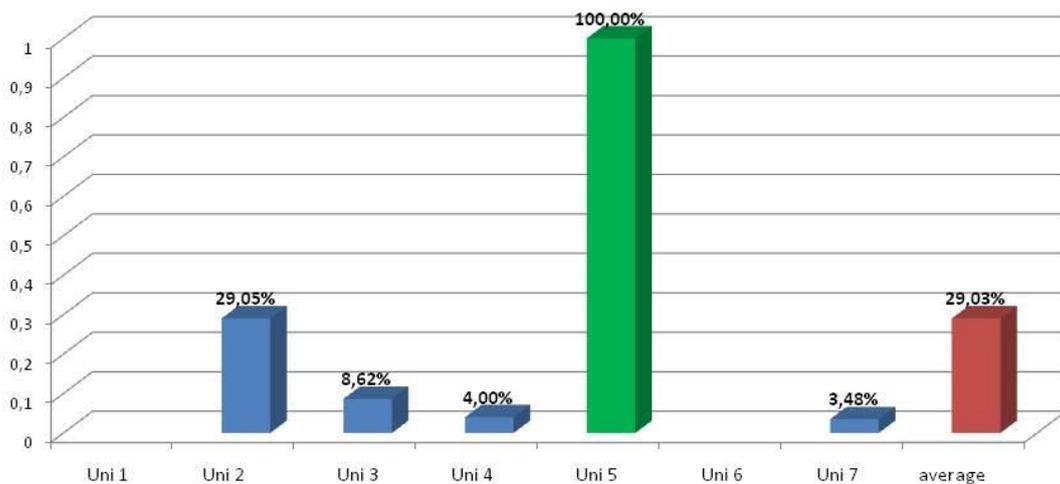
Some examples may illustrate this:

Mobility windows as a question of "all or nothing"

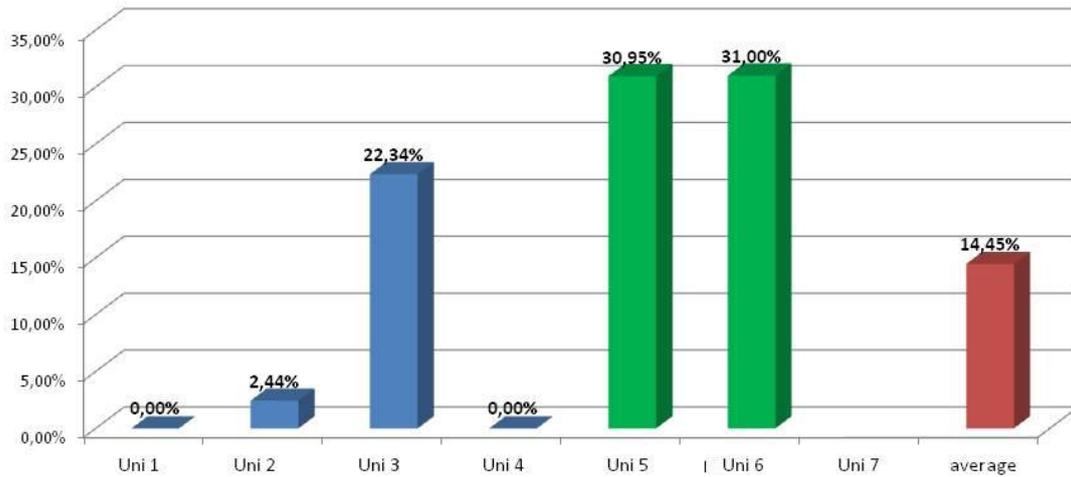I-92: What is the proportion of curricula having mobility windows incorporated?
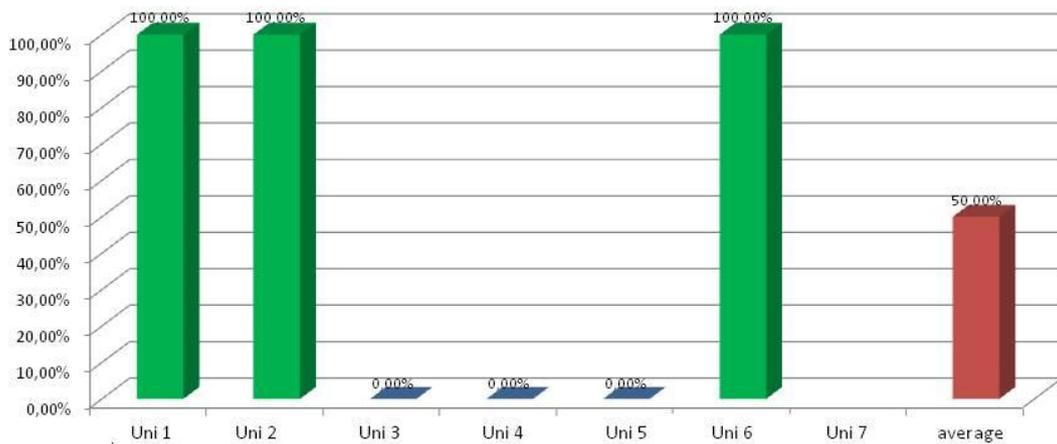
Example of an outstanding performance

O-25: What is the proportion of students enrolled in your foreign language courses of all your students?
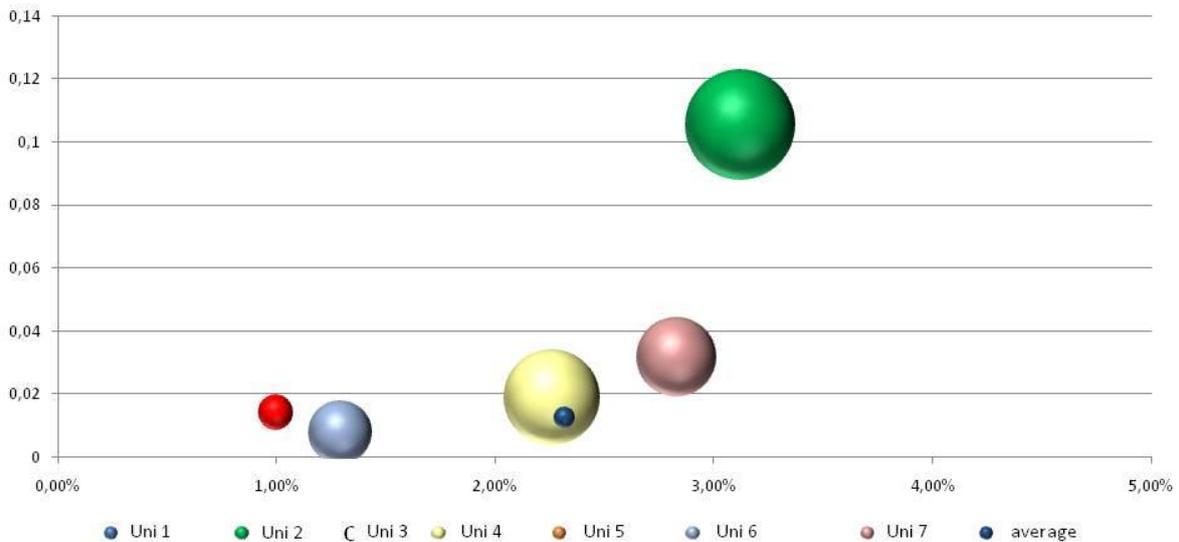
Toolbox

For the toolbox, various outcomes could be realised. The testing showed that it worked even in its very rough draft version for single HEIs, and thus for self-assessments and to some extent for group work as well, providing the group restricted itself to fewer indicators, was very careful with definitions of their own and used different ways to spend more time on each indicator.

It became further clear that the indicators need even greater refining and streamlining. Most groups provided suggestions for improved and more precise wording in order to enhance the toolbox. More in-depth definitions and glossary inputs are also helpful to reduce the need for inner-group discussions. However, it also became clear that the toolbox can and should never substitute for group definitions but has to remain somewhat more generic.

Overall

As expected, the first testing phase was very useful for developing the toolbox further and somewhat less useful on an individual level for some of the associate partners. The latter depended as much on the expectations of the participants as on the group structure. Considering that this project is a development project, the first phase produced all results needed. Additionally, some participants decided to join the second testing round and deepen their involvement. Other groups decided to re-run some of the data from the first round after clarifying indicators and understandings. The IMPI team will support them by helping to analyse this data.