The Knowledge Partnership

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Course Portfolio Management

Good Practice Benchmarking Summary

University Market Insight Conference 2019

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Introduction

At the workshop on portfolio management facilitated by David Roberts from The Knowledge Partnership, delegates were shown a series of good practice statements/benchmarks for university portfolio management, derived from the evidence from the HEFCE funded i-MAP project (2012) that TKP was instrumental in delivering.

This was an instant poll rather than a reflective activity. There were 22 responses and most respondents rated every component.

The sample of respondents cannot be regarded as representative of the UK university sector. First, only an estimated 60% of institutions have at least one market insight professional, although most have data analysts in planning teams that may contribute to portfolio related work. Second, those completing the poll had opted to attend a workshop on portfolio management; it can be assumed they would be more engaged with this type of work than their peers.

Nonetheless, some interesting insights have emerged.

Delegates were presented with 10 statements of best practice and asked to rate their university on the following scale. Responses were captured via a mobile app.

1 = weak or non-existent

2 = new or patchy practice

3 = in place across the institution but improvements are required

4 = well established effective process in place

Summary Results & Commentary

Across the 10 benchmarks the modal and mean rating was 2 which equates to “new or patchy practice”.

Overall, this suggests that the trend is towards a more systematic and market-based management of the course portfolio but that practice is not yet embedded and might be inconsistent across institutions and/or over time.

This feels about right from TKP’s experience and reflects the fact that universities (in England at least) have been trying to come to terms with a more market-led environment, whilst retaining many of the cultural characteristics of the public sector.

Where are the perceived areas of relative strength when it comes to portfolio management?

Benchmark 2 and 6 had a median rating of 3 and an average rating of 2.7 which suggests these processes/practices are in place but that they need further development or enhancement to be optimal.

It appears that new courses are now being developed/proposed in a more systematic context, as part of academic/business planning within schools or faculties etc rather than popping up in a random fashion. This represents real progress over the past 10 years. It implies that concepts for new provision are considered as a gathered field and in relation to the existing portfolio.

It also seems to be more common for there to be an academic/portfolio strategy committee, led by a member of the executive (usually D/PVC academic or education), that is also responsible for approving new programmes.

In the past, academic planning and course approval were typically handled by different decision-making groups and decision-making processes.

However, we know that in some larger universities both functions (i.e. academic course planning and course approval) are fully devolved to individual colleges/faculties. This model may be less able to support the development of interdisciplinary provision and may also lead to “turf wars” at the borders between academic business unit territories.

If these are the emerging strengths, where do weaknesses remain?

It does not seem to be common practice to openly discuss or systematically evaluate why a course is consistently failing to achieve sustainable enrolments. In our experience the reasons are usually diagnosable (at least 14 variables identified); without diagnosis the appropriate actions cannot be identified.

It also seems that where a school or college has a high failure rate of newer courses (i.e. not hitting the KPIs agreed), there is rarely a review as to why this might be. This is reminiscent of the oft used definition of insanity – continuing to do the same thing whilst expecting different results.

The final weakness (have you spotted the emerging theme?) is that the performance of new programmes is rarely monitored and reported relative to the targets in the original business case which triggered approval.

What’s the theme?

Well, it seems that whilst universities are improving in terms of more integrated approach to course planning and approvals, there is a lack of review, reflection and learning. The only way to know if the planning and approval processes in place are “fit for purpose” is to review the outcomes and close the feedback loop.

If a good proportion of new courses are successful and fit effectively into the existing portfolio, then all is well and good. But it seems that too few universities bother to check if this is true.

It is also telling that most respondents did not think that poorly performing individual new courses were subject to review and, if applicable, speedy withdrawal or suspension.

This partly explains the continued evidence of a long tail of small cohort courses in many HEIs. If there is little post approval analysis or reporting, this puts all the emphasis on the robustness of the initial business/market case and the associated approval process, including the quality of the market insight presented.

Together the feedback on these benchmarks raises some issues about who is accountable for course success or failure, and the overall quality and effectiveness of the governance of the portfolio.

Tabulated Benchmark Results

No	Best Practice Statement	Mode	Mean
2	The flow of new courses from concept stage, through development, to final approval and launch, is integrated into the academic and business planning processes of each academic unit (e.g. school or faculty/College) rather than being a rolling “ad hoc” activity.	3	2.7
6	The committee charged with new course approval is chaired by a member of the senior leadership team. This committee also has responsible for the academic strategy and the periodic review of the programme portfolio, so as to facilitate an integrated approach.	3	2.7
1	There is an overarching academic strategy that provides a useful context in which new course ideas can be evaluated, academic unit development planned and the existing portfolio reviewed.	2	2.3
3	There is a regular review of the portfolio of programmes from a market/business case perspective to ensure ongoing sustainability. If this process is nested in the schools/colleges, its results are reported to/considered by the university leadership.	2	2.3
4	There is a common set of KPIs that is used to evaluate the performance of course portfolio.	2	1.9
8	New courses that do not meet viable (agreed at approval) levels of enrolment after the first two full recruitment cycles are automatically subject to review. Courses that subsequently fail to reach viable enrolment numbers are withdrawn.	1	1.9
5	Building on the KPIs, there is a transparent set of criteria and weighting used to determine which programmes and subjects are to be invested in or closed.	2	1.7
7	The enrolment, application and student experience performance of all recently approved new programmes is monitored and reported to the committee responsible for initially approving them.	1	1.7
10	Where the rate of new course failure is high within any particular school/college this triggers a more fundamental review of the provision model, particularly where overall recruitment is under pressure.	1	1.7
9	The reasons why courses fail to achieve sustainable levels of enrolment are discussed by the course approval committee; lessons are disseminated and processes adjusted as required.	1	1.6