

AIMING AHEAD

FINAL BUMPER EDITION

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Changes in AIMS from August 2003

Early in 2003, after 35 years of highly successful service to the HE community, the Management Committee took a strategic decision to close AIMS.

However, you will be delighted to hear that AIMS & Associates Ltd has been formed by members of AIMS' staff, who will continue to provide the same service to the same high standards, but at daily rates.

There is no legal connection between the work of the new company and the old AIMS, but the website includes much of the useful archival and other data from the existing AIMS' site. The existing site (<http://www.aims.ac.uk>) will continue to be available for a while but users may have to change their links eventually to <http://www.aims.eu.com>. You can make contact through the website, the existing telephone number (0151 794 3132) or by mobile (0779 163 4738).

Recent Work

Work recently completed by AIMS includes:

- The Provision and Procurement of Legal Services
- The Functions and Organisation of an Academic Division
- The Support Arrangements in a Vice-Chancellor's office
- Pre-QAA Audit of Documents in School Baserooms
- The Introduction and Development of Corporate Timetabling
- IT/IS Support in Faculties

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SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST

- *AIMS services still available through AIMS & Associates Ltd*
- *AIMS closed, with no management or legal relationship with AIMS & Associates Ltd*
- *Increasing focus on benchmarking*
- *Successful seminar on timetabling and space management*

AIMS has been providing high-quality support for university management for the past thirty-five years, in all areas of university work. AIMS worked in universities across the whole of the UK, and provided many benefits in strategic innovation, service improvements and financial savings. The quality and scope of the work has been well-documented in the annual reports, with the later ones being available on the website, and in the quality evaluation questionnaires that users complete when projects are completed.

Despite the quality and the benefits, which they acknowledged, the members of the Management Committee considered that because of the changes and continuing crises in university funding, they did not wish to continue to provide specific budgeted funding, and they decided in February to close AIMS with effect from the end of July 2003.

However, as described above, universities and colleges can still benefit from the skills and experience of the staff through AIMS & Associates Ltd.



Benchmarking: HEFCE Conference March 2003

The Background

To any reasonably competent manager or consultant, it is almost second nature to benchmark in some way. Back in the 1970s, many administrative organisations used clerical work measurement based on benchmark times for particular activities or levels of output. This was replaced gradually by comparisons of methods and staffing levels with those in similar organisations, and other approaches that sought to be both broader-brush and more sensitive to seasonal variations, peaks and troughs. Underlying all this were some of the techniques of Organisation and Method (“O and M”), such as charting, critical analysis and process improvement using a well-defined methodology based on searching questions and what we now call benchmarking, although that word was not used. Most large organisations had their own specialist staff for process review and improvement. It was usually said that the whole organisation should be reviewed over a five-year cycle, which would then recommence.

BPR and Process Benchmarking

Some of the techniques of O and M were taken over, largely unchanged, by Business Process Re-Engineering, the main differences being that computers had by then become the backbone of administrative systems, while BPR practitioners usually sought a “step change” approach instead of the incremental approach previously favoured. BPR also sought to address issues across the entire organisation using a process-based approach. Procedure analysis has developed

and evolved from O and M, through BPR to modern-day Process Benchmarking. The changes have been mainly in two areas. One was to make senior management more aware of the potential benefits that could be achieved by the analysis and comparison of approaches and methods. The other was to apply the techniques at the policy and strategic evaluation level. These were significant improvements for all concerned, but they are largely one of management perception rather than technique or methodology.

“Universities have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reform and to make a difference”

The developments have been accompanied by the growth of external consultancy agencies, often offshoots of accountancy firms, that can offer a wide range of skills, although sometimes their approach has been criticised for being based too much on purely financial considerations (“cost of everything and value of nothing”), or on the probity issues of consultancy work in areas identified by the same firm in their capacity as internal auditors.

League Tables

More recently we have seen the development of league tables and targets based on various perceived benchmark figures, some of which have undoubtedly been beneficial though others have been questionable. League tables have become an accepted management tool in many aspects of public organisations. Their simplicity is both their main benefit and their main disadvantage: they are easily understood, but might not give a complete picture.

The HEFCE Benchmarking Conference

The HEFCE conference on Benchmarking on 18th March 2003 was therefore a significant event for all those interested in how universities approach this important issue. It is quite clear that the need has, if anything, increased. Another interesting point is that although, for a couple of decades now, the pendulum has swung towards outsourcing such areas, it is evident that several institutions, notably Sheffield Hallam, have decided that in-sourcing is more effective, presumably since it means dedicated staff of known quality, and no profit element or VAT in the bills.

Introduction to the Conference

Professor Sir Adrian Webb, a member of the Public Services Productivity Panel, chaired the conference. He opened by saying that simple benchmarking, aimed at league tables and targets, was discredited and “intellectually corrupt”. However, process benchmarking could help make organisations more efficient and save money, ensuring that objectives are reached, services are customer-friendly and users’ experiences are positive. The conference would signal that HE is committed to continuing improvements.

Measuring to Manage

John Smith, Director of the British Quality Foundation, spoke about “Measuring to Manage Stakeholder Satisfaction”. He said we measure too much and use little of what we measure. Most managers spend 40% of their time on day-to-day work, 60% on fire fighting – correcting errors and dealing with problems. However, in really successful organisations, managers spent 20% of their time on day-to-day work, 20% on fire

fighting and up to 60% on planning improvements, even where there were no apparent problems. He outlined the Excellence Model and “Burning Issues”. They were selecting measures, overcoming social, political and cultural barriers, managing the measurement system and analysing the data. This is well-known territory covered routinely in reports by groups like AIMS, SUMS, and probably the majority of those who are involved in such work in any way.

Predicting the Scope for Savings

The Conference then split into “break-out” sessions. Professor Thanassoulis, of Aston University, had looked at Core Administrative Services (CAS: Finance, the Central Administration, Personnel/HR and the Academic Registry, but not Libraries, IS, Estates, Residences and Catering) as a system. The inputs were the costs. The outputs were services: for students; for staff; for technology transfer. The income generated by students was a proxy indicator of service demand. Non-CAS staff costs were a better proxy of staff service demand than actual numbers, since seniority might mean they require more services. Identifying the costs of administration in academic departments is sometimes difficult, as we know, as some is done by staff who are not administrative. The services for technology transfer could be proxied by the income from Research Grants. Dividing the output proxies by the input (CAS) gave benchmark output/input ratios.

After showing how the analysis techniques had developed, Professor Thanassoulis showed how the less efficient institutions could be projected to an “efficient boundary” to predict the scope for savings, while retaining the same

relative balance of the three service areas.

This seemed to be potentially a useful indication of what ought to be possible. Identifying where the savings could be made is a different matter. “Something hidden, go and find it, go and look behind the ranges, something lost behind the ranges, lost and waiting for you, go!” There’s no more guidance. Also, if the broad-brush data merge highs and lows, an apparently good result might conceal more than it reveals.

Business Process Management

Professor Colin Armistead discussed the Excellence Model and key questions in the management of processes. He broadened the meaning of “process”, from the easily recognised Managerial Processes to “softer” group processes, social, cognitive and political. He described the “sandcone” hierarchy of targets: have a quality product; work to time; do it faster; improve flexibility and agility; reduce costs. Finally, he described several key points for HE Process Management.

Using the EFQM Excellence Model

The third session attended by the AIMS representative was by Carol Steed, of Sheffield Hallam University. SHU has three full-time staff, plus clerical support, involved in benchmarking internally and externally. She described how benchmarking and the EFQM Excellence Model could be brought together. SHU had involved 60 members of staff together recently in an exercise to improve the enrolment processes. All this offered insights into how the EFQM model could be used as a template for reviews of any aspects of universities, and might well be of use to many for that purpose.

Questions and Answers

The delegates gathered again for a plenary question and answer session. *How can we find the time for this?* Make it part of the “day-job”, as with practice, it will become effortless, like driving. Remember that the point is ultimately to free resources by doing things better. (Another possible answer is to bring in knowledgeable support, such as AIMS or SUMS). *Does benchmarking need very senior support?* Yes, and if the senior management could not see the point at first, they will once the benefits of a successful project are clear (though even completing many useful and beneficial projects is no guarantee of continuing support). *What resources are available to help?* A wide range, including several represented at the conference. *Can it stifle creativity?* It provides more time and freedom and unlocks creativity. *Is there still a place for standard statistics?* Yes, at the top level. It’s important to know how others perform in comparison with you.

Closing Address

Paul Boateng MP, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, gave the closing address. He said that reform was vital, so that the extra 6% funding every year until 2006 would make a difference and produce a world-class university system. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The importance of HE was not just to students, but also to their immediate communities: in regeneration, jobs, communities and their self-image. He said that, “HEIs have a responsibility to look at their own processes and management arrangements to make them relevant to their students and to society.”

It was a very useful conference with much to stimulate thought.

National Seminar on Timetabling— University of Manchester

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**You can find
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Please see
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for the
changes to
the way that
this service
will be
provided.**

The second national seminar on timetabling organised by AIMS was held at the end of 2002 in the University of Manchester.

AIMS has worked extensively in areas of room scheduling and timetabling, producing reports and strategic recommendations for Bangor, Salford, Sheffield Hallam, Manchester and Liverpool Universities. AIMS has also carried out extensive biannual surveys of policy and practice in these areas, and the results of the latest survey appear on the website (<http://www.aims.ac.uk>)

After registration and coffee, the seminar was introduced by Dr Malcolm Winton, Registrar, University of Salford and Chairman of the AIMS Management Committee.

Adrian Armstrong, responsible for the management of timetabling at the University of Salford, was the first speaker. He spoke about the processes by which the system has been extended and developed across the whole University from its initial implementation in one area. This was followed by a very lively question and answer session, with delegates showing a great deal of interest in Adrian's experiences.

Linda Turnbull, who is responsible for the Central Timetabling Unit at Manchester University, then described how there had been a period in which the CTU had suffered considerable instability in staffing, leading to poor relationships with users in some faculties and departments because they did not understand the problems. Stability of staffing had enabled them to address the service issues and to re-establish a good reputation and credibility. User forums had proved very beneficial, and relationships with departments had improved hugely. These comments endorsed what AIMS has always found in surveys: the importance of trust and good relationships between the staff of the central timetabling unit and the academic staff and departmental administrators.

The next speaker was Toni Frascina, Manager of the Organisational Development Programme at Sheffield Hallam University. In a powerful and amusing presentation, she described how SHU had been looking at the room scheduling process since 1999. An initial trial had produced much feedback but showed the need for a different approach. SHU wanted their teaching timetable published earlier and available on the Web; stability; corporate information with a distributed user base; more efficiency and effectiveness, and less stress.

Toni then identified several problems, which included no overall ownership of the process and inefficient feeder processes. Improvements depended on factors that included more standardisation and a networked corporate system with links to other corporate systems. A Pro Vice-Chancellor would "own" the process at a strategic level. Within each School, the University had appointed "academic champions" to resolve conflict and liaise between academic and administrative staff and who met occasionally to discuss best practice. They had also established a Timetablers' Forum for administrative staff involved in scheduling, to share

good practice and resolve problems that crossed school boundaries. In summary, Toni emphasised the importance of unity through a single strategic owner, an incremental approach to implementation, constant planning and project management, and excellent communications at all levels.

Manchester provided us all with an excellent lunch, during which there was time to view the displays. These were deliberately low-key, and some delegates felt that they could have been made more prominent within the seminar as a whole. There were displays from Syllabus Plus (Scientia), Facilities CMIS and Adesoft. Representatives of all three companies were able to discuss their latest developments and strategic approaches. Syllabus Plus and CMIS are both well-known in HEIs. Adesoft is a French product now being offered in the UK and their representative, Philip Chew, was able to describe a complex project linking five schools with a total of 60,000 students at one of the Universities at Grenoble.

After lunch, Alan Bowles, an independent consultant, speaking on behalf of CMIS, spoke about modeling space requirements for a new site or building.

He was followed by Andrea Buttle, of Southern Universities Management Services, who talked about Defining Best Practice in the Management of Space. She discussed best practice in the use of scheduling systems, noting that "teaching space management", which includes all aspects of the systems, was a better description of the processes than "timetabling". Benchmark comparators had to be chosen with care, since HEIs differed considerably.

She produced data related to four institutions, showing a possible correlation between the proportion of teaching rooms booked and space utilisation. Finally, she outlined nineteen good practice benchmarks that could help institutions to develop teaching space management.

This was followed by a lively discussion by Duncan Corbett, of Syllabus Plus (Scientia) about developments in user interfaces, and after a break for tea and coffee, by a forum and plenary session chaired by Malcolm Winton and comprising all the speakers plus Philip Chew from Adesoft.

Overall, it was a very informative conference covering a wide range of topics from planning a new scheduling service, extending a limited service across the institution, improving credibility and user relationships, benchmarking for success, modeling, and current developments in software.

The AIMS' Good Practice Guide on the introduction and use of computerised timetabling is still available, price £20. Please contact us if you wish to purchase it.