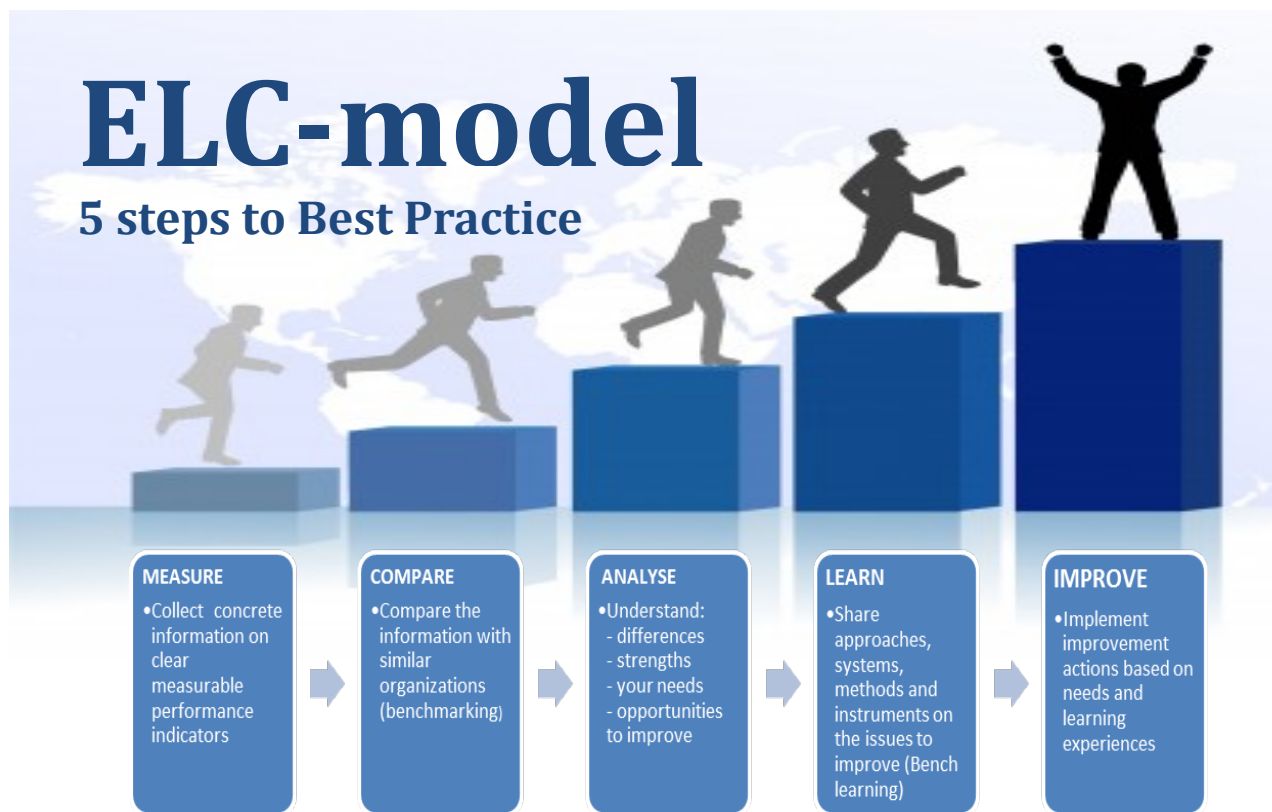


The EQUASS Learning Community (ELC)



Why EQUASS Learning Community¹?

In many member states of the European Union social services is currently undergoing transformation as a consequence of political, economic and social redirection. As results of the modernisation of the social sector, the social service sector is developing into a more open and competitive market. This will have consequences for the quality approaches that will be applied.

The development into an open and competitive market will have impact on the stability of the social sector: organizations providing social services are in continuous processes of transformation. Social service providers cannot expect a stable social sector that will endure for lifetimes. They must learn to understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations and create a capacity for undertaking them integral into their organisations.

In other words, social service providers become adapted at learning. They must become able not only to transform their institutions, in response to changing contexts, situations and requirements; they must also invent and develop organisations which are 'learning systems', that is to say, systems which are capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation. Many organization providing social services no longer have a stable base in technologies and knowledge of particular services or the systems build around them. Subsequently, very significant changes in the nature and organization providing social services can be identified.

¹ The EQUASS Learning Community (ELC) is an initiative of the European Platform for Rehabilitation (EPR) in partnership with Equal-Consulting AS (Norway) and Sinase (Portugal).

Social service providers and public authorities will more and more operate in an open environment that also crosses regional and national borders. Productivity and competitiveness are more and more a function of knowledge generation and information processing: social service providers are more and more organized in chains and networks of service delivery, management and distribution.

Social service providers need to invest not just in new technology to make services more efficient, but also in the flow of know-how and up-to-date practices that will sustain their operation. Organizations need to be good at knowledge generation, appropriation and exploitation.

The ELC offers a platform to social service providers and facilitates the continuous process of transformation and meeting needs in a continuously changing context by gaining knowledge through initial learning events and through exchange of practices based on the comparison of performance on common indicators. The ELC also offers a platform to social service providers to enhance and promote their Corporate Social Responsibility². Corporate social responsibility concerns actions by companies over and above their legal obligations towards society and the environment. Certain regulatory measures create an environment more conducive to enterprises voluntarily meeting their social responsibility.

What is the EQUASS Learning Community?

The EQUASS Learning Community (ELC) is an international network of social service providers who are committed to the EQUASS principles for quality and to continuous quality improvement through learning by exchange of current practices and by common learning events based on the result of benchmarking on common indicators.

The ELC is a membership organisation of social service providers who showed their commitment to the EQUASS principles for quality by EQUASS certification (EQUASS assurance and EQUASS Excellence) and by EQUASS recognition (Stairway to EQUASS Excellence). Those social service providers which do not have EQUASS certification / recognition can apply for becoming potential membership for a period of two years. Within the period of two years these organisations must have been awarded with EQUASS certification / recognition.

The ELC benchmark?

The ELC facilitates benchmarking based on the EQUASS principles for quality. The basis for benchmarking will be the ELC benchmark. The ELC benchmark is based on the common indicators for the EQUASS Principles.

The ELC benchmark allows social service providers to gauge their own position, creates a learning curve to help improve performance and helps boost transparency, profile and image. The ELC benchmark typically shows up any areas for learning. Providing comprehensive insight into the performance of a social service provider, it allows the provider to identify any areas in need of improvement and actions that need to be taken.³ The ELC benchmark also provides insight into relationships between performances. Social service providers may use the ELC benchmark outcomes in communicating with stakeholders to improve their profiles and promote transparency.

The ELC benchmarking process is a process of systematically comparing performance as a starting point for improvement, and involves collecting and reporting on data from different social service providers and/or organisational units. All ELC members can compare their performances with those of other ELC members, and in particular with those of their best-in-

² See: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. (Brussels, 20.10.2011)

³ Note that benchmarking is always a means and never an end in itself, and that benchmarking outcomes should always be tested against the vision and the policies of the social service provider.

class peers at national and international level. This helps to identify areas for improvement and appropriate action. The ELC benchmarking process allows comparison of social service provider's performance and that of other ELC members and provides insight into where you stand relative to other ELC members. ELC benchmarking will help to broaden the perspective of the social service provider and to make the social service provider less inward looking.

The learning aspect in the ELC is the most important aspect of the ELC-network. Bench learning (=learning based on bench marking) is defined as: "systematically investigating the performance and underlying processes and practices of one or more reference organization providing social services in a particular field, and comparing one's own performance with these practices, resulting in action-oriented learning".

How does the ELC work?

Social service providers will provide information of current performance based, on common indicators, in an index period to the EQUASS benchmark database. The information will be collected from the administration of the social service provider and information about perceived performance collected by standardised surveys among service users, staff and other relevant stakeholders. The information about the performance of the social service provider will be made available in the beginning of the year. (January – February)

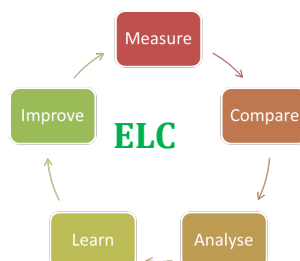
Based on the provided information, the social service provider will receive a benchmark report which describes the current performance of the social service provider and the relative position of other (national and international) ELC members. This report will also identify areas for improvement based on the results of benchmark. The report will be made available for the ELC members. (March and April)

The ELC network will organise national and international bench learning events. The national and international bench learning events will offer initial training and learning activities and workshops where social service providers can meet and exchange practice based on identified needs for learning. The program of the bench learning events will be based on the needs and expectations of the ELC members. The national and international learning events will take place in the period May – June. The International bench learning events will take place in the period September – October.

Piloting ELC benchmark in 2015

The ELC benchmark will be piloted in Estonia and Lithuania in 2015 and in Norway and Portugal in 2016. Social service providers who are committed to the EQUASS system may apply for participating in piloting the ELC benchmark. For participation in piloting the ELC benchmark, limited social service providers are invited to send a letter of motivation to the National ELC Coordinating organisation⁴. The organisations who have been involved in the development of the ELC benchmark may also participate in the ELC benchmark on voluntary basis.

"Exchange, sharing and learning from each other are Key Factors to your success"



"The ELC-methodology brings best practices and opportunities for learning and improvement to your team, departments, organization and sector"

The cycle of the EQUASS Learning Community model for improving practice and results

⁴ National ELC coordinating organisations are: Equal consulting AS (Norway), Sinase (Portugal), EQUASS Estii (Estonia) and EQUASS Lietuvoje (Lithuania)