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Articulating and Comparing Standards through Benchmarking of Assessment

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Abstract

The universities of Deakin, Tasmania (UTAS) and Wollongong (UOW) are not aligned with any university groups or networks. This paper presents their cross-institutional benchmarking relationship as a case study in building the necessary trust, collaboration and shared methodology. The partnership was distinguished by the way it tapped into a collegial quality improvement culture. It had its genesis at the 2009 AUQF conference and the partners adapted and 'test-drove' a framework previously developed by an ALTC Teaching Quality Indicators Project team. UTAS and UOW had formerly been involved in a trial benchmarking project on academic transition support in 2009 and extended this partnership to Deakin. The universities are comparable in terms of establishment, discipline areas, regional presence and experience of the AUQA audit cycle, with some significant contextual differences that needed to be recognised, such as structures and terminology. They are at similar stages in relation to the development of their benchmarking policy and processes. The focus on assessment ensured the project would explore the issues central to the Cycle 2 AUQA audits, such as standards, learning outcomes and student feedback. The explicit benchmarking of assessment processes made transparent the areas of improvement and areas of good practice in relation to assessment standards. Outcomes included action plans for each university and a robust framework for benchmarking assessment.

Keywords: benchmarking, assessment, standards, benchmarking partnerships

1. Benchmarking as an Approach to Standards

The Australian university sector has entered a standards-driven phase of quality review and improvement with a new regulatory framework soon to be introduced under TEQSA. The meaning of 'standards' in higher education practice is still being determined. At this stage, all parties seem to agree that 'standards' do *not* mean uniformity, one-size-fits all or a national curriculum. Diversity is to be supported as a critical and valued feature of Australian universities (Bradley, 2011) and one which is fundamental to the role of universities in our civil society. Yet it is also agreed that 'standards' must have *substance*; they must provide a basis for comparison.

In the higher education context standards may define *minimum practice*, in the form of 'threshold standards'. Or they may seek to establish performance indicators with *levels of performance* (Coates, 2010). Or they may correspond to *statements of outcomes*, such as the discipline standards currently under development by ALTC-funded projects. Or they may be derived as a set of *benchmarks for good practice*, based on comparisons with similar operations and which may evolve as the sector or an institution

matures. All of these approaches are valuable and offer enough flexibility to accommodate diversity. It is the last approach – standards derived from benchmarking good practice – that will be explored here.

2. Benchmarking as a Process for Improvement

This paper discusses the development, implementation and outcomes from an assessment benchmarking project and benchmarking partnership with the universities of Deakin, Tasmania (UTAS) and Wollongong (UOW) in 2010. Jackson and Lund (2000, cited in Stella & Woodhouse, 2007, p.14) define benchmarking as, 'first and foremost, a learning process structured so as to enable those engaging in the process to compare their services/activities/products in order to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses as a basis for self improvement and/or self regulation.' The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) has encouraged benchmarking because it is 'a systematic means of obtaining and specifying comparisons and learning from them' (Stella & Woodhouse, 2007, p.18). Cycle 1 audits identified benchmarking as an area for improvement (Baird, 2006). The universities of Deakin, UTAS (including the Australian Maritime College) and UOW were all encouraged to lift their levels of benchmarking activity in their 2005-6 Cycle 1 audits.

The Cycle 2 audits require universities to provide an overview of benchmarking activities and outcomes and their impact (AUQA, 2011, p.38). A desk-review of Cycle 2 AUQA audits reports (Booth, 2011) found that universities are at three different stages of development towards benchmarking:

- *Early Implementation*: universities need to develop and implement a benchmarking framework, processes and partnerships as part of their Quality System
- *Further Refinement and Alignment*: universities have begun to implement benchmarking processes and partnerships but further refinement and alignment with other university processes is required
- *Full Embedding*: universities have established benchmarking frameworks, processes and partnerships across the sector and make extensive use of external reference points and benchmarking.

Deakin, UTAS and UOW are all undertaking Cycle 2 audits in 2011. Each has moved through an 'early implementation' stage of benchmarking and into 'further refinement and alignment'.

The desk-review of Cycle 2 audit reports also identified key markers of a mature benchmarking process:

- A university wide approach to benchmarking aligned to strategic areas
- Alignment with a institutional data strategy, data warehouse and risk framework
- Unit and course level benchmarking
- Mechanisms for selecting appropriate institutions
- Establishment of benchmarking reference groups.

The next section will discuss the project aims and methodology, peer review outcomes and overall outcomes for the benchmarking project.

3. Methodology

3.1 Formation of Benchmarking Partnership

The three universities were unaligned, but with pre-existing relationships, formed through a previous benchmarking project on Academic Transition Support (2009) between UTAS and UOW and through informal benchmarking between Deakin and UOW. They were comparable in terms of year established, multi-campus structure, regional presence, discipline areas and their experience of the AUQA audit cycles. Their benchmarking awareness and confidence had also grown over a three to four year period.

The immediate catalyst for the assessment project was the linking of like-minded project facilitators at the 2009 AUQF in Alice Springs. They were united in their commitment to making benchmarking work, their focus on standards and their willingness to be open and collaborative. This 'meeting of minds' was essential for the project to work. It formed the basis for its successful management and the confidence to accommodate variations such as using it to compare Academic Board/Senate practices.

3.2 Agreement on Area and Scope

The partners identified assessment as an area for improvement which fell within the ambit of their Cycle 2 AUQA audits.

The project was carefully scoped through a collaborative process involving senior academic and quality leaders from each university. The project had to be achievable (1) with a reasonable amount of faculty effort and (2) within the timeframe of the project. It was therefore decided to:

- limit the scope to undergraduate programs (onshore and offshore)
- focus on a single year (2009)
- focus on the policy, procedure and practice pertaining to standards. Detailed benchmarking of assessment design for student learning was considered more suited to follow-up projects organised at the discipline level.

The role of Academic Board/Senate in relation to assessment policy and standards was included within the scope of the project but will not be discussed in detail in this paper.

3.3 Agreement on Methodology

This project would involve virtually every faculty across three universities. It was essential to strike the right balance between the time spent and the perceived benefits.

To focus discussion and maximise the effectiveness of meeting and self-review time, a streamlined but robust format for the benchmarking was developed. This format – including a scoping statement, performance indicators, good practice statements and performance measures – was derived from the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE) Benchmarking Framework (2007). For the indicators and measures, the project used as a reference point the Australian Teaching Quality Indicators Project (TQIP) on assessment (Davies, 2009). Three of the four TQIP statements were adapted as performance indicators:

1. Assessment purposes, processes and expected standards of performance are clearly communicated and supported by timely advice and feedback to students
2. Assessment practices and processes are fair, reliable and valid and produce marks and grades that represent the standards achieved by students
3. Assessment policies and procedures are developed, implemented, reviewed and improved in accord with quality principles.

The model was tested against the work of Boud et al (2010) and aspects of Boud's work not captured by TQIP were synthesised into the framework.

Faculty leaders were consulted on the model and methodology. The framework was enhanced by an expert reviewer (Prof Gordon Joughin). The questions were tested in faculty groups on one campus and further refined.

The result was a clear, robust framework for benchmarking assessment: see Appendix 1 (performance indicators, good practice statements and performance measures), Appendix 2 (extract from self-review template and ratings scale).

3.4 Self-reviews within each University

All three universities used self-reviews not just for data collection and evaluation but also to facilitate discussion and reflection within each faculty and across the institution. When applying this approach each university adopted different methodologies to suit their own organisational structures. For example, UTAS used a survey of academic staff as part of the evidence gathering and included postgraduate students in data analysis; UOW and Deakin formed Assessment Benchmarking Reference Groups; UOW included faculty leaders in self reviewing another faculty; Deakin's and UOW's Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning) coordinated the development of individual faculty self-reviews.

The common experience was highly collegial and educative, culminating in a high-level institutional review by a representative panel across all units involved. It showed that benchmarking is not alien to the academic experience; in fact the process mirrors collaborative projects in scholarship and research.

3.5 Peer Review Process

The peer review process involved all three partners in a face-to-face discussion. Leaders in teaching, learning and quality from the three universities met to compare the outcomes of their institutional reviews with reference to the agreed performance indicators and measures and to evaluate the evidence provided. The facilitators from each university conducted it as an interactive workshop.

Each university was able to discover where its practice was exceptional, where it met sector standards and where it may have lagged behind. Exemplars were identified to aid each university's improvement strategies. Strategies for addressing common problems were tested in discussion.

3.6 Final Report and Action Plans

Each university derived a plan for a way forward which would promote good practice, address improvements and identify areas for possible collaboration. The recommendations in these reports are currently being taken up by working groups and committees.

Table 2: Leveraging good practice – some examples

Exemplar	Action
UTAS has carried out a comprehensive project on criterion-referenced assessment; outcomes included resources and exemplars and faculty champions.	**UOW action plan** and **Deakin action plan** both include a project to offer exemplars and staff development on writing marking guides and rubrics; these projects will benefit from the experience and resources of UTAS.
Deakin has developed a tool to map graduate attributes across courses**.**	**UTAS action plan** includes developing course-mapping software; UTAS will start this project by viewing the Deakin model.
UOW has a compulsory on-line module on academic integrity for all commencing undergraduate students.	**UTAS action plan** includes on-line modules on academic integrity for new students; UTAS will review the UOW and other existing models.

4. Key Outcomes

The overall key outcomes from the assessment benchmarking project include:

- The development of a highly useful tool for measuring assessment based on the Griffith TQIP project (Davies, 2009) and the work of Boud et al (2010). This project implemented and validated the broad indicators developed by TQIP.
- The identification of common areas for improvement in assessment standards which include developing best practice models on feedback; assessment standards for course levels and developing group exemplars for students. Findings demonstrate that assessment has to be

sustainable for both students and staff (Boud, 2010). Benchmarking can also be seen as a process for articulating standards (Bell, 1999).

- The identification of key actions for improvement for each university to support institutional improvement. These included:
  - establishing clearer connections between learning outcomes, Graduate Attributes/Qualities and assessment
  - additional staff development and increased used of best practice models for teaching staff
  - further work on marking practices for group work
  - initiating discipline-based assessment benchmarking initiatives.
- The development of rigorous benchmarking processes, including Benchmarking Reference Groups. It was found that more work could be done benchmarking at the course/program level which reflects the national direction (Oliver, 2009).
- It was a mutual learning process for all involved. It contributed to enhancing organisational learning and aligning other processes, not just assessment, across the institutions. Examples include professional development for sessional staff; clarification of the roles and responsibilities of Associate Deans and the alignment to institutional data warehouse capacities.

Another valuable part of the benchmarking process has been the positive relationships which were formed and the possible future areas for collaboration in benchmarking.

5. Success factors for higher education benchmarking

After two major benchmarking projects across universities and three years' experience in negotiating successful implementation and outcomes, the following table is offered as a synthesis of the 'lessons learned'. These success factors, framed in Table 2 as questions to ask during the benchmarking journey, will not apply in every case but may assist particularly in large projects where initial preparation is critical.

Table 2: Success Factors for Higher Education Benchmarking

1. Determine which areas to benchmark	
Is this area aligned to strategic goals in priority areas? Will a major project in this area deliver significant benefits relative to the costs? Are there drivers in this area which will sustain energy for the process, and ensure that benchmarking is given priority? Is benchmarking in this area supported at the executive level and on the ground? Are there adequate human, financial and other resources to support benchmarking in this area?	
YES *Continue*	NO *Rethink*
2. Identify benchmarking partners	
If possible, is there a history of sharing practice and/or an established relationship to build upon? Do the partners have compatible institutional missions, values and goals? Is there a comparable commitment to benchmarking in this area from senior and other relevant managers of the partner institutions? Is there a high level of trust between senior and other relevant managers of the partner institutions? Is there a shared understanding of explicit benchmarking goals? Are all partners willing to share information and discuss successes and failures? Are the partners similar enough to offer transferable strategies in this area?	
YES *Continue*	NO *Rethink*
3. Determine types and level of benchmarking	
Is there broad agreement on the types of benchmarking, eg data-sharing, strategy-sharing, evidence-based self-	

review etc? Is there broad agreement on the level of benchmarking (eg policy level, discipline level, course level, unit level)? Is there agreement on the model that should be the basis for benchmarking? If no existing model can be used or adapted, are there sufficient resources to develop and test a suitable new model? Is there agreement on what is and what is not to be in scope? Is the scope realistic and achievable by the participants within the anticipated timeframe?	
YES *Develop and sign MOU and continue*	NO *Rethink*
4. Prepare benchmarking documents and templates including the purpose, scope of project, performance indicators, performance measures and performance data	
Have the indicators and measures been clearly documented and thoroughly reviewed by each university for alignment to local structures, processes and terminology? Are the indicators and measures aligned to accepted standards and good practice across the sector? Have participants who will be carrying out the benchmarking, eg faculty and/or professional leaders, had the opportunity to provide feedback to ensure clarity and fit?	
YES *Continue*	NO *Further development needed*
5. Design benchmarking process	
Is there a benchmarking reference/steering group? Have faculty and/or professional leaders had the opportunity to comment and contribute to the design of the process? Does the benchmarking process encourage: • engagement? • sharing, both within and across areas? • reflection? • an evidence-based approach? • identification of good practice? • identification of areas for improvement? Does the choice of process align with organisational culture – for example, does it mirror other forms of scholarly collaboration (eg round-tables, academic committees, surveys, comments on papers)? Does the process minimise demands on staff time?	
YES *Continue*	NO *Further development needed*
6. Implement benchmarking process	
Is there a communication plan? Have faculty and/or professional leaders been briefed on their responsibilities? Is there appropriate project management? Are there clear expectations for deliverables and deadlines? Is there a checking process (quality assurance)?	
YES *Continue*	NO *Further development needed*
7. Review results	
Have faculty and/or professional leaders had the opportunity to contribute to the review process? Does the review process encourage engagement, reflection and sharing, both within and across institutions? Is the review process designed to produce a clear evaluation, including ratings, identification of good practice and identification of areas for improvement? Is the review process carried out at multiple levels, eg faculty level, institutional level, across institutions?	
YES *Continue*	NO *Further development needed*

8. Communicate results and recommendations	
Do reports clearly identify good practice, standard practice and recommendations for improvement for each university? Within each university, is there a consultation process to obtain agreement on recommendations, eg through management and committee structures? Were participants acknowledged and thanked? Is there a process for sharing the benchmarking methodology and lessons learned with other areas of the university?	
YES *Continue*	NO *Further development needed*
9. Implement improvement strategies	
Are there clearly assigned responsibilities for implementing the recommended improvements? Have future collaborations between the universities been agreed, where this would assist improvements? Is there a process for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of recommended improvements and their effectiveness?	

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Appendix 1: Assessment Benchmarking Indicators, Good Practice Statements and Performance Measures – derived from Griffith TQIP, Statements and Quality Indicators of Good Practice in Assessment (Davies, 2008)

Performance Indicator #1: Assessment purposes, processes and expected standards of performance are clearly communicated and supported by timely advice and feedback to students

Good Practice Statement: Students receive clear and timely information on the aims and details of assessment tasks; marking and grading practices; expected standards of achievement; and requirements for academic integrity. They are provided with timely feedback on their performance and supported in making improvements.

Performance measures:

1.1 Expectations are clearly communicated

Trigger questions:

a) Are the learning outcomes and graduate qualities of the subject clearly communicated to students?
b) Are the learning outcomes and graduate qualities of the course/program clearly communicated to students?
c) Are students given clear and timely advice in writing on the aims, types and weightings of assessment tasks (eg in subject outlines)?
d) Are the assessment and marking processes, including how the individual marks contribute to the final grade, explained to students in forums where they can ask questions?
e) Are all students (onshore and offshore and irrespective of mode) given opportunities to understand how to correctly reference sources and avoid plagiarism, in line with university policies, eg on academic integrity?

1.2 Advice and feedback are provided

Trigger questions:

a) Are examples of assessment performances used to demonstrate required standards of academic achievement so students can learn what is expected of them and monitor the quality of their work?
b) Do students receive constructive feedback on performance on assessment tasks in a timely manner and to support them in making improvements?
c) Are students given instruction and proactive support for team/group work?

PI #2: Assessment practices and processes are fair, reliable and valid and produce marks and grades that represent sector/disciplinary standards.

Good Practice Statement: Assessment tasks are comparable across sites and free of bias. Outcomes are open to review. Tasks test the achievement of the knowledge and skills required to meet sector/disciplinary standards. Marks and grades reflect the level or standard of each student's achievement.

Performance measures:

2.1 Practices and processes are fair

Trigger questions:

a) Does the faculty/school ensure that assessment tasks are comparable across sites and cohorts (onshore and offshore and irrespective of mode)?

b) Does the approach to first year assessment support student transition to successful university study?

c) Do assessment practices accommodate the needs of equity students, eg through providing a range of assessment methods?

d) Does the faculty/school coordinate assessments across subjects, eg to avoid repetition of task types, avoid overloading students at particular times and ensure appropriate coverage of learning outcomes?

e) Are processes in place to appeal against a mark or have it reviewed in a timely manner?

2.2 Assessment is reliable and valid

Trigger questions:

a) Are assessment tasks aligned with learning outcomes?

b) Are assessment tasks aligned with graduate attributes/qualities?

c) Are grades moderated between members of teaching teams or other relevant colleagues, including across sites?

2.3 Marks and grades: (1) represent the level of achievement by students; and (2) reflect sector/disciplinary standards

Trigger questions:

a) Do the marks or grades allocated for group assessment tasks reflect the achievement of each student?

b) Does the faculty/school ensure that assessment is testing for a level of learning commensurate with the year/level of study?

c) Are explicit marking criteria and explicit standards of achievement used in making judgments about student achievement?

d) Do staff compare standards [expected of students] with colleagues at other institutions?

e) Do faculties/schools monitor grades across subjects to identify anomalies and ensure consistency in assessment practices?

PI #3: Assessment policies and practices are developed, implemented, reviewed and improved in accord with quality principles

Good Practice Statement: Assessment policies and procedures are developed, implemented and reviewed with reference to good practice in the sector and under the oversight of the Academic Senate. Policies and procedures are communicated to and adopted by teaching staff and professional development is provided to support the improvement of assessment practices.

Performance measures:

3.1 Policies and practices are developed and implemented within a quality system

Trigger questions:

a) Does the faculty ensure that University assessment policies and procedures are communicated to and adopted by teaching staff, including casual teaching staff?

b) Are professional development opportunities and resources made available to staff at all levels (eg workshops, conferences, relevant literature) to assist them to improve university assessment practices?

3.2 Policies and practices are reviewed and improved

Trigger questions:

a) Does the faculty review assessment practices to ensure they are validated by observed learning outcomes?

b) Does the faculty review assessment practices to ensure they are aligned with disciplinary and professional standards?

c) Does the faculty review assessment practices, to ensure that assessment tasks contribute to developing the overall graduate qualities for the course/program?

d) Is there a comparison of plagiarism and other academic misconduct data related to assessment of students in different locations and/or modes of delivery?

e) Do staff use feedback from peers and students and other opportunities to share good practice and improve assessment practices?

Appendix 2: Extract from Assessment Benchmarking Self-review Template

Performance measure	Rating[1] [Place an X in the most relevant column]				Rationale [Use dot points to identify practices that support this rating]	Cite evidence [Provide name and web reference, data sources]
	Level 4 (Yes)	Level 3 (Yes, but)	Level 2 (No, but)	Level 1 (No)		
1.1 Expectations are clearly communicated Consider in rating and address in rationale: a. Are the learning outcomes and graduate qualities of the subject clearly communicated to students? b. Are the learning outcomes and graduate qualities of the course/program clearly communicated to students? c. Are students given clear and timely advice in writing on the aims, types and weightings of assessment tasks (eg in subject outlines)? d. Are the assessment and marking processes, including how the individual marks contribute to the final grade, explained to students in forums where they can ask questions? e. Are all students (onshore and offshore and irrespective of mode) given opportunities to understand how to correctly reference sources and avoid plagiarism, in line with university policies, eg on academic integrity? f. Other issues?						
RATING AGAINST 1.1:						

1. Ratings for the performance measures were assigned between Level 4 and Level 1 as follows:

Level 4	**Yes …**	Effective strategies are implemented successfully across the faculty
Level 3	**Yes, but …**	Good strategies are in place; some limitations or further work needed
Level 2	**No, but …**	This area has not yet been effectively addressed, but some significant work is being done across the faculty or institution
Level 1	**No …**	No effective strategies are in place, e.g. not addressed, addressed only in isolated pockets, notionally addressed but major barriers to implementation